

Sydney meeting opposes persecution of Julian Assange

Our reporters
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At a meeting in Sydney last night, prominent independent journalists and defenders of democratic rights, including Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national secretary James Cogan, spoke against the ongoing persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and discussed the way forward in the fight for his freedom.

The event, hosted by “Politics in the Pub,” was addressed in person by Cogan and Joe Lauria, a well-known US journalist and editor-in-chief of the *Consortium News* website. Lauria travelled to Sydney for the meeting. It was chaired by Cathy Vogan, an independent filmmaker.

Tony Kevin, a former Australian diplomat who has spoken out against government criminality, and Caitlin Johnstone, a prominent online journalist and defender of Assange, delivered pre-recorded video addresses.

Supporters of WikiLeaks travelled to the Sydney meeting from as far away as the Australian cities of Canberra and Adelaide, and from New Zealand. It was streamed to a global audience on *Consortium News*.

The meeting coincided with renewed calls for an end to the US-led vendetta against Assange because of his leading role in WikiLeaks’ publications of damning whistleblower leaks that exposed war crimes, mass surveillance and illegal diplomatic intrigues.

It followed the issuing of a statement by acclaimed musician Roger Waters, appealing for the widest participation in SEP rallies next month in Sydney and Melbourne, which will demand that the Australian government take immediate action to secure Assange’s return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

In his opening remarks, Lauria condemned the establishment media for having “turned against WikiLeaks and Assange. They’ve smeared him, which is what people in power do when they are being challenged and they don’t have a response. They call themselves journalists, but they’re failing.” He stated that many media outlets, “sycophantically publish whatever government officials tell them, without questioning.”

Lauria placed the attacks on Assange in the context of a broader erosion of civil liberties, which he linked to the massive growth of social inequality over the past decades and a state of “permanent war.”

The US journalist warned that “democracy is on life support.” He stated: “We have incredible amounts of inequality on levels the west hasn’t seen since maybe the gilded age in the US. The middle class seems to be evaporating before our eyes and money is transferred to the one percent.”

Lauria concluded by declaring: “If we’re going to keep anything left of our democracies, given the failure of the media, we absolutely need WikiLeaks. We need Assange to continue to work and to be free to do what he wants.” He said securing Assange’s freedom would be a “great victory in defence of the public and free media.”

Cogan, who spoke next, outlined the political perspective of next month’s SEP demonstrations. He stated that an Australian government would only intervene to secure Assange’s freedom “if it is more fearful of a movement of the working class than it is of causing frictions in its relationship with Washington.”

The SEP national secretary referred to the role of mass pressure from below in forcing former Liberal-National governments to intervene in 2007 to have David Hicks returned to Australia from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, and in 2015 to secure the release of journalist Peter Greste from imprisonment in Egypt.

The audience applauded loudly when Cogan noted the “very welcome return to Australia of Hakeem al-Araibi, freed from detention in Thailand and protected from extradition to Bahrain, as a result of the courageous campaign by the Australian and international football community, particularly led by [former Socceroo player and sports journalist] Craig Foster.” The Australian government took diplomatic action to secure the release of al-Araibi.

Cogan condemned the refusal of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments to take similar action in defence of Assange. He said that their active support for the

persecution of the WikiLeaks founder was because “they are completely committed to the US-Australia military and strategic alliance. They are just as hostile to WikiLeaks as their American counterparts, because it exposed great power crimes and intrigues.”

He stated: “The public support for Assange finds no expression in either the media or the parliament. The silence will only be broken by the development of a completely new mass movement in the working class, in open opposition to the entire establishment, especially the Labor Party and the trade unions.”

Cogan concluded by rejecting any claim that the Australian government does not have the ability to secure the freedom of Assange. He noted that Australia currently has economic sanctions in place against North Korea, Iran, Russia, Syria, Myanmar and others.

The audience again applauded when the SEP leader stated: “It can impose sanctions on the British ruling class. The Australian government has the power to freeze all British assets and freeze the repatriation of all profits and income from their investments [in Australia] until Julian is freed. This would not harm any British workers, who are the ally of Australian working people in the fight to defend democratic rights. It would, however, have a significant impact on the British financial elite, who run the government.”

In her remarks, Johnstone stated that Assange’s “persecution exposes the undeniable truth that we are in fact ruled by a transnational power establishment which is immoral and dishonest to its core. We can see that anyone who offends the US centralised empire will find themselves subject to trial by media. Because the media are owned by the same plutocratic class which owns the empire.”

Johnstone also condemned the role of the official media, commenting: “If our news outlets were sincerely doing their job as the Fourth Estate, they would be reporting on the persecution of Julian Assange in the same way they report on the persecution of any dissident journalist. But they don’t. That in and of itself speaks volumes.”

She pointed to the broader implications of the assault on Assange, noting that he was “being made an example of” by the ruling elite, as a warning of “what happens to truth tellers when they get too much attention.”

Kevin described Assange as a “the most important campaigner for accountability and respect for the Nuremberg principle that just following orders is not a defence of war crimes.

“Julian’s work exposing all those documents that the US would have wished never to be exposed has been enormously important in giving a whole population of people around the world a real understanding of how great

powers behave when they’re on the ropes as the US is now,” the former diplomat stated.

Kevin demanded that the Australian government take action to secure Assange’s return to Australia. Kevin also warned against the growing drive to war, including Australia’s role in US-led military preparations directed against Russia and China.

Following the formal remarks, audience members asked a range of questions. One asked “what took the Australians such a long time to react” to the protracted attacks on Assange.

Cogan answered: “In 2010, virtually every media organisation, the trade unions and the Greens all came forward and vowed that they would defend a persecuted Australian journalist and citizen.” He cited 2010 comments by then head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Ged Kearney, who had declared that “Assange should be supported as an Australian citizen.”

Cogan explained that developments in 2011 marked a crucial shift in world politics. In that year, revolutions took place in Tunisia and Egypt, “provoked in part by the exposures made of criminal government corruption by WikiLeaks.” In response, “there was a shift into the camp of the ruling class by the unions and the so-called left parties. They abandoned Assange. That’s why there hasn’t been a movement.”

Cogan stressed that explaining “how Assange has been betrayed,” by an entire fraternity of pro-imperialist and upper middle-class organisations, was critical to building a mass movement in his defence.

Following the event, Christine Assange, Julian’s mother and a long-time campaigner for his freedom, tweeted her appreciation to the organisers of the meeting and all of the speakers.

The authors also recommend:

Rally to demand the Australian government acts to free Julian Assange! Sydney Martin Place Amphitheatre, March 3! Melbourne State Library, March 10!



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