

Sydney rally issues strong demand for the freedom of Julian Assange

Our reporters
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A demonstration organised by the Socialist Equality Party in Sydney yesterday made a powerful demand for the Australian government to end its collaboration in the persecution of Julian Assange and take immediate action to secure the freedom of the WikiLeaks publisher and Australian citizen.

In the weeks preceding the rally, prominent independent journalists, artists and defenders of democratic rights issued endorsements of the event. Those who lent their support included filmmaker John Pilger, singer-songwriter Roger Waters, civil rights advocate Professor Stuart Rees, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges, Elizabeth Vos, editor-in-chief of *Disobedient Media*, Joe Lauria, editor-in-chief of *Consortium News*, filmmaker Curtis Levy, Terry Hicks and Christine Assange, Julian's mother.

The protest was attended by a diverse audience of some 300 people. Those who participated included individuals who have supported WikiLeaks for the past decade, as well as students and young people who have only recently been alerted to Assange's plight, along with workers, retirees and academics.

Hundreds of people around the world watched the event via a Facebook Livestream. Hundreds more registered their support for the event on Twitter and other social media. Not a single Australian establishment media organisation covered or reported on the demonstration.

Over the coming days, the WSWS will publish the full text and video of all the speeches delivered to the rally, and interviews with those who attended.

Linda Tenenbaum, a longstanding leader of the Socialist Equality Party, chaired the demonstration. She opened by sending "greetings of solidarity and appreciation to Julian Assange and to every fighter, the world over, for democratic rights and civil liberties, for social equality, peace and justice."

She condemned the media blackout of the dangers

confronting Assange and of the rally, declaring: "By attending this rally, you have already taken a significant stand against the wall of political and media censorship, throughout Australia and around the world, that has been erected to deepen the isolation of Assange from his many millions of supporters, and prevent him from continuing his vital work."

James Cogan, the SEP's national secretary, declared that the rally, and the support it had evoked, reflected two processes.

"Firstly, it reflects the reality that the working class, after being suppressed for decades, is coming forward in a massive resurgence of the international class struggle," Cogan declared. "Secondly, the support this rally has won from a truly impressive group of journalists, artists and academics signifies that the best elements in society are once again turning to the working class."

Cogan said that Julian Assange "is a class-war prisoner. His persecution is above all an attack on the working class." The SEP national secretary relayed a message he had received from Christine Assange, outlining the deteriorating health of her son, after almost seven years of arbitrary detention in Ecuador's London embassy.

Cogan denounced the central role of Australian governments in the campaign against Assange, which he said was a product of their support for the US alliance, and their own turn towards authoritarian forms of rule.

He stated: "The only circumstances in which the Australian government will act to free Julian Assange is if the capitalist class in this country is more fearful of a mass movement of the working class, demanding Julian's freedom, than they are of any disruption to their venal relations with the United States."

Cogan pledged that the SEP would fight to make the persecution of Assange a central issue in this year's Australian federal election. He concluded: "We are sending a clear message to Julian Assange today and he

will hear it—you are not alone, you have not been abandoned, you have not been forgotten. You will be freed.”

Professor Stuart Rees, the former head of the Sydney Peace Foundation, and a well-known fighter for civil liberties, spoke next.

Rees placed the work of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in a centuries-long tradition of dissident journalists, publishers and whistleblowers, spanning from Daniel Defoe and Thomas Paine in the 18th and 19th centuries, to Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers documenting US war crimes in Vietnam in the 1970s, to Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.

Rees declared that Assange was a “significant international citizen who has made a stand for truth and for truth telling.” He called on all those participating in the rally “to continue to protest and to continue to demand that Julian Assange be brought home.”

Joe Lauria, editor-in-chief of *Consortium News*, travelled from Thailand to speak at the protest. He said that since 2006, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange had been “censuring governments, with government’s own words, pried from secrecy by WikiLeaks sources—whistleblowers. In other words, WikiLeaks has been doing the job the US Constitution intended the press to do.”

Lauria issued a scathing denunciation of the corporate press and its support for the attacks on Assange, noting that today, the media “almost always serve the governors, not the governed.”

He stated: “Now the traditional media can be bypassed. WikiLeaks deals in the raw material that when revealed, governments hang themselves with. That’s why they want Assange’s head. They lust for revenge, and to stop further leaks that threaten their grip on power.”

Oscar Grenfell, the national convenor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the SEP’s youth wing, said that Assange was being persecuted because the ruling elites “know how much he and WikiLeaks have done to politically educate an entire generation of young people.”

The IYSSE representative called on all students and young people to join the fight for Assange’s freedom. He said it was the “cutting edge of the struggle against the attempts by governments and the corporate elite to suppress free speech, censor critical and alternative media, and prevent young people knowing what is really taking place in the world.”

John Pilger, a world-renowned investigative journalist,

was the final speaker. He gave a vivid description of the Orwellian conditions Assange faces in the Ecuadorian embassy, recalling his last meeting with the WikiLeaks founder on New Years’ Eve 2018.

Pilger reviewed the scope of WikiLeaks exposures of US government war crimes, diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance. “This is real journalism,” he said, “journalism of a kind now considered exotic: the antithesis of Vichy journalism, which speaks for the enemy of the people and takes its sobriquet from the Vichy government that occupied France on behalf of the Nazis.”

Pilger reviewed the previous Gillard Labor government’s central role in the attacks on Assange, beginning in 2010. He poured scorn on the praise heaped upon Coalition MP Julia Bishop, who last week announced that she will not be contesting the next election.

As foreign minister, Pilger said, Bishop had rejected calls for the Coalition government to take action in defence of Assange. He declared: “The elevation to celebrity feminism of one so politically primitive as Bishop tells us how much so-called identity politics have subverted an essential, objective truth: that what matters, above all, is not your gender but the class you serve.”

Pilger warned: “The persecution of Julian Assange is the conquest of us all: of our independence, our self-respect, our intellect, our compassion, our politics, our culture.” He issued a call to “Organise. Occupy. Insist. Persist. Make a noise. Take direct action. Be brave and stay brave. Defy the thought police ... If Julian can stand up to Big Brother, so can you, so can all of us.”

Tenenbaum concluded the rally by calling for maximum participation in the demonstration at the Victorian State Library in Melbourne on Sunday, March 10, at 1:00 p.m., and in the Solidarity Vigil organised by the Julian Assange Defence Committee on March 10, from 3 p.m., to 5:00 p.m., outside Ecuador’s London embassy, where Julian Assange continues to remain under effective imprisonment.



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