

New Zealand rally demands freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) took part in a rally in Wellington on Sunday called by Free Assange NZ, a group of WikiLeaks supporters. Protesters gathered outside the US embassy and marched to the nearby British High Commission.

About 25 people joined the rally, called to protest last week's illegal arrest of the WikiLeaks editor. British police physically dragged him from the Ecuadorian embassy in London where he had been confined for nearly seven years. Ecuador's government of Lenin Moreno rescinded Assange's asylum, in violation of Ecuador's own laws, and handed him over for extradition to the US.

The Trump administration wants to put Assange on trial for the "crime" of publishing leaked documents revealing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the horrific "Collateral Murder" video showing the gunning down of journalists and civilians in Iraq.

The rally was part of international protests, including in Britain, Germany and the US, demanding the release of Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who remains in prison for refusing to testify against the WikiLeaks publisher. In Australia, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held powerful rallies in Sydney and Melbourne last Friday. Central to the SEP's election campaign is the fight to mobilise the working class to force the Australian government to intervene to secure Assange's safe return to Australia.

Leading SEG member Tom Peters addressed the Wellington protest, warning that "the threat of extradition means Assange's life is in danger. No one should have any illusions about that. As soon as he gets to the US, he will undoubtedly face more charges including espionage charges which carry the death penalty. That is what the Obama and the Trump

administrations have been preparing.

"Democrats and Republicans alike are out for blood," Peters said, denouncing the lie that Assange worked with Russia to manipulate the US election. The aim of the anti-Russia propaganda "is to prepare for war and justify censoring the Internet, while covering up what WikiLeaks actually revealed: that Clinton is a stooge of the Wall Street banks and a war criminal who gloated about the destruction of Libya, and that the Democratic Party rigged the primaries in her favour."

Peters explained that the New Zealand Labour Party-led government was complicit in the persecution of Assange. Last year the government refused to even discuss a petition presented by Free Assange NZ calling for him to be offered asylum in New Zealand.

"No one should believe the propaganda that Jacinda Ardern's government is kind and compassionate," Peters said. "Ardern is not 'anti-Trump' as the media portrays her. Her government has dramatically strengthened the alliance with Washington."

The SEG leader noted that the Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition had continued New Zealand's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had further strengthened the alliance with US imperialism in preparation for future wars, including against China.

Peters said the government was exploiting the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attack, in which fascist Brenton Tarrant killed 50 Muslim worshippers, to censor social media and increase surveillance. The real target of such measures was not fascism—the product of xenophobia and racism whipped up by the ruling elite to divide workers—but the working class.

"Freedom to publish, discuss and share information is vital for the working class as it seeks to fight back against austerity and imperialist war," Peters said,

pointing to the eruption of strikes and mass protests by workers in the US, France, Mexico, India, Algeria and other countries over the past year. “In New Zealand there have been nationwide strikes by doctors, nurses, teachers, and other workers shifting to the left as a result of poverty and inequality.”

The ruling class was responding to the threat from below “with the methods of the 1930s: war, dictatorship and fascism,” Peters said. He called for the fight to defend WikiLeaks and Assange to be taken up by the working class internationally as an essential part of the fight for socialism.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Group distributed the statement “Free Julian Assange!” and spoke to several people at the protest.

Tom, a student and organiser of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Victoria University of Wellington, said: “Assange and Manning showed the world the brazen crimes and lies of the world’s elite. To the ‘insiders’ and the powerful, letting people know the truth is unforgivable. If we want to preserve democratic freedoms and the right to know what our governments are doing in our names, we will have to fight for those rights. The powerful will not be reasoned with. Capitalist governments of all kinds are building their powers for a continued assault on the working class. Our only option is revolution.”

Ben, a tradesman, said the media had tried to “assassinate the character” of Assange in order to discount everything WikiLeaks had revealed. He said Trump was doing “the same stuff,” as previous US presidents “but in a more belligerent fashion,” without regard for international law.

Ben added that Assange “is an Australian, why are Australia’s government not going: ‘Hold on, you’ve illegally detained one of our citizens!’ Why aren’t they doing anything about it?”

Heidi said WikiLeaks has “just been doing journalism and they’ve never had to retract any of their stories. He’s been imprisoned for doing journalism and telling the truth about what the US government is doing.” She described the attacks on Assange for helping “Russian interference” as “a conspiracy theory. That’s just the Democratic Party trying to put the blame for losing to Donald Trump on someone else: ‘It’s Russia’s fault!’”

Annabelle, a mother of four, originally from Britain, said she came to the protest after following WikiLeaks for years and being shocked by the video of Assange being manhandled out of the Ecuadorian embassy. “The industrial murder machine is getting worse and worse,” she said. “It’s a frightening world and I want some truth out there. The mainstream media want me to know things and I want to question that and find other sources.”

Annabelle praised Chelsea Manning, saying, “Good on her for not talking. She went through hell for how many years? And she went back to prison and is still not talking. She’s brave.”

She said the cheers by UK Prime Minister Theresa May and other politicians over Assange’s arrest “sicken me,” and continued: “There isn’t a parliament, there isn’t a democracy... It doesn’t matter who’s in power, they’re still working for wars, they’re still working for the money-holders.”

Annabelle said there were some things she liked about UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, but added that “none of them can be trusted,” and that Corbyn was “backtracking” on his support for Assange. Corbyn is calling for Assange to be extradited to “answer” allegations of rape in Sweden—a frame-up that has long been discredited—which would merely be a step towards his extradition to the US.



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