

UK climate change protests: Students speak out against treatment of Assange and Manning

Our reporters
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Thousands of schoolchildren and students demonstrated around the UK Friday to protest government inaction on climate change. Socialist Equality Party campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, “An appeal to young people: Defend the right to tell the truth! Defend Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning!” The previous evening Assange was indicted by the US Department of Justice on 17 counts under the Espionage Act.

In Sheffield, around 300 students marched from Devonshire Green, rallying outside City Hall. SEP campaigners distributed around 250 leaflets and spoke with dozens of students about the plight of Assange.

Isaac, a Y12 student said, “The US intervenes into loads of foreign countries to keep their interests safe and their oil safe. There’s been various things recently like coup attempts in Venezuela and now trying to build up support to invade Iran. It’s disgraceful that this isn’t being reported more.

“Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning have been exposing US war crimes and they’ve been arrested for it which is completely disgraceful. I say get yourself educated about US war crimes and really be conscious about how the media’s used to try and justify war against foreign countries for imperialist acts.”

Rosa, a Y10 student agreed, “What happens in America is being covered up, the influence they have in South American elections and their influence in the Middle East and they are frightened to discuss things. The public have the right to know what’s happened behind closed doors and the atrocities they are involved in. We make the West appear much greater than it is. I think in fact we have lots of issues that we do need to understand and do need to sort out.”

Rosa spoke of the importance of whistle-blowers. “When people do come out with these things, they are doing a great service to the people. They do play a major role in society, and the fact is they shouldn’t need to be there. Governments should be able to take responsibility for their actions. People shouldn’t be scared to come out and in be in fear of prosecution. That’s outrageous.”

Rowan Smith is a UTC Sheffield Engineering student who spoke during the open mic session, “I’ve come here for the government to do something about climate change. They need to sort it now, because in 10 or 12 years it’s the point of no return. There’s a lot of issues with society today. In the past, the government used to pay for everything, why can’t they do that now? Why do they have to make the cuts to schools and the National Health Service? They have the money.

“We need to educate people. Julian Assange, yes, he did expose war crimes, which is bad for the government. But for the people it’s really good because we know what’s going on, we have actual information.”

Maia Evans, also from UTC Sheffield studies Creative Digital Media, said “I’m here to protest over climate change. There will be no civilisation as they know it, if they don’t do anything. The 1 percent who could be doing something are not. When the Notre Dame fire happened within a week three very rich people said they could pay for it. But why are we not paying to save the earth? We have to try and stop what’s happening.”

Asked what she thought about Assange being charged under the Espionage Act and facing 175 years in prison, Maia said: “It’s just wrong. First of all, for doing the

public a favour he should not be punished at all—never mind 175 years.”

Dimitri said, “I do believe that both Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning have served humanity by leaking these documents exposing lies or crimes that governments did. They shouldn’t be jailed for that. It shouldn’t be illegal to tell the truth.”

Hundreds demonstrated in St. Peter Square in central Manchester. Sarah, a deputy head teacher in Bolton who had been on previous climate day demonstrations, attended. She said of Julian Assange: “When I first heard about the sexual allegations I thought ‘that is a coincidence’, because he had just exposed the lies of governments through WikiLeaks.”

“There is no transparency in his case. He is in prison now and his basic human rights have been denied. He has been in solitary confinement in that Embassy for years. They will keep him in solitary confinement [in Belmarsh prison] as they don’t even want him to have discussions with other prisoners. We are living in dangerous times. His treatment is a warning to everybody else.”

Asked what she thought about Assange not getting a mention at the World Press Freedom Day events, Sarah replied, “That is because most of them (mainstream media) are in the pockets of big business.”

On the climate change crisis, Sarah said, “How can we think that the governments are going to do anything about climate change when we have got big business lobbying governments? There’s no transparency there either. This government is like a cartel.”

Evie said she didn’t know who Assange was but after seeing the leaflet said that his treatment by the authorities was “morally wrong.” She added, “Yes, they [Assange and Chelsea Manning] should be defended and I will find out more about them. It’s very important for us to know these things”.

Eva, 15, Esme, 13 and other friends attended from a school in Manchester and have been at each climate change demonstration so far. Eva said she was attending this Friday because Labour party-run Manchester City Council was proposing to fine children “if we went on future demonstrations.” She said her mother and grandmother had protested against nuclear weapons: “You can do something about climate change. We can find other sources of energy.”



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