New Zealand protest opposes persecution of Julian Assange and Australian journalists

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) took part in a protest rally on Wednesday called by Free Assange NZ, opposing the persecution of jailed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. The event was held two months after Assange was brutally dragged by police out of the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had been previously granted asylum to protect him from the threat of extradition to the United States.

Protesters walked from Cuba Street in downtown Wellington to the British High Commission, spoke with members of the public and distributed leaflets in support of Assange, including the WSWS perspective, "The global war on journalism."

Assange is imprisoned in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, where his health and psychological well-being have reportedly deteriorated further. Last week, the Trump administration issued a formal extradition request charging him, as a journalist and publisher, under the US Espionage Act. An extradition hearing is scheduled to commence in London on June 14.

Whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who allegedly provided hundreds of thousands of documents to WikiLeaks, also has been re-jailed in the US for refusing to testify against Assange.

Assange's only "crime" is the publication of evidence of war crimes, including the massacre of unarmed civilians and journalists by US forces in Iraq, and of diplomatic cables revealing US imperialism's bullying of other countries and support for despotic regimes around the world. In 2017, WikiLeaks published documents outlining the computer hacking and cyber warfare operations of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Socialist Equality Group (SEG) member Tom Peters addressed protesters outside the British High Commission, saying: "The entire operation against Assange and WikiLeaks, including Ecuador's revocation of his asylum, is illegal. Last month, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer described Assange's prolonged imprisonment and isolation as torture, and warned that if Britain extradites the WikiLeaks founder he risks being subjected to further torture in the US."

Peters explained that governments in the US, Britain, Australia and New Zealand were seeking "to intimidate and silence all journalists, whistleblowers and opponents of war crimes, mass surveillance and other crimes carried out by the state. The ruling class, alarmed by growing strikes and protests around the world, is bringing back the methods of the 1930s—fascism, extreme nationalism and anti-democratic forms of rule—to defend capitalism, prepare for new wars overseas and crush the movement of the working class."

The speaker noted that police raids last week on Australian journalist Annika Smethurst's home and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) headquarters in Sydney showed that the persecution of WikiLeaks had "opened the floodgates for attacks on others and for increased censorship of the media."

The Australian journalists were targeted for revealing war crimes carried out by Australian special forces in Afghanistan, and for exposing plans to legalise the Australian Signals Directorate's spying on the population. Under draconian legislation supported by the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party, reporters can be jailed in Australia for up to 10 years for "receiving" or revealing information that supposedly harms "national security."

Peters said democratic rights, such as freedom of information and free speech, were under attack in every

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country, because they were “not compatible with endless war and endless attacks on living standards.”

He added that the New Zealand Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had remained completely silent on the police raids in Australia, for the same reason it had refused to defend Assange: “That is, the alliance with US imperialism, which has been strengthened under Ardern. New Zealand troops are remaining in Iraq and Afghanistan at least another year and $20 billion is being spent on the military so it can integrate more effectively in US-led operations.”

The New Zealand state-run and corporate media, Peters said, had either remained silent on the persecution of Assange or actively joined in the global campaign to smear his character.

Peters appealed to the working class to rally to the defence of Assange and demand his freedom, as the spearhead of a broader campaign in defence of democratic rights. “The horrors of the 20th century dictatorships and world war cannot be allowed to return!” he said, urging workers and young people to take up the fight against capitalism.

The WSWS spoke to people participating in the protest as well as members of the public.

Philip, a retiree, approached protesters to express support for the campaign. He compared Assange to Edward Snowden, who revealed mass spying by the US National Security Agency and its “Five Eyes” partners, including New Zealand’s Government Communications Security Bureau. “What’s happened with the attacks on Assange and Snowden is to make an example so that other people won’t do the same thing,” he said. “They should be getting peace prizes.”

Philip said there had been “a lot of promotion of innuendo” about Assange, including the discredited allegations of rape made in Sweden. He had also heard claims “that people died as a result of WikiLeaks revealing information, and I’ve looked into that and there’s absolutely no evidence that it’s true. America just wants him because they don’t like freedom for anyone else—or for their own people, actually.”

A former resident of Australia, Philip denounced the raids on the media in that country. He said governments wanted to discipline the media so they could “control what people think. In a democracy that’s really important because it can control the way people vote, and that equates directly to power for politicians.”

Laura, a student, said she had been following WikiLeaks for about six years and was a “massive fan” of the organisation. “Assange is being vehemently attacked because he’s exposed governments’ breaking of their own rules: war crimes and spying.

“Since WikiLeaks there have been laws basically impinging on the rights of journalism and a free press and I find that extremely troubling, that we no longer have the freedom to get the truth. To be criminalising those that expose the truth in the name of ‘national security’ doesn’t seem to be serving the citizens of the state at all.”

Responding to the smear that Assange’s revelations about Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton’s pro-business machinations had assisted Trump during the 2016 election, Laura said: “I think it would be inevitable that someone who’s confronting and exposing corruption would be attacked from every possible angle. So we need to be very skeptical of these claims and seek the truth.”

Laura appealed to others to join the campaign to free Assange and Manning, saying: “Do you want to live in a world where the truth cannot be exposed, or would you rather live in a world where you have access to the truth? And do you believe that your freedom depends on it? Because I certainly do.”

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