

Two protesters arrested at Melbourne rally in defence of Assange

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17 June 2019

Two protesters were violently arrested at a Melbourne rally in defence of Julian Assange last Friday, in the latest demonstration of the hostility of the Australian political establishment and state apparatus to any action demanding freedom for the WikiLeaks founder.

The event was held outside the city's UK consulate the same day as the first British hearing over a US request for Assange's extradition. The Trump administration is seeking to prosecute the WikiLeaks founder on an unprecedented 18 charges over WikiLeaks' role in the exposure of US war crimes and diplomatic conspiracies.

The peaceful protest in Melbourne, organised by supporters of Assange and WikiLeaks, was attended by around two dozen people. They were met by a large contingent of police, including members of the Australian Federal Police (AFP), plain-clothed detectives and uniformed police officers.

Two protesters unfurled a "Free Julian Assange" banner. They reportedly hung it up between two street poles using masking tape.

Police immediately moved to take down the banner. Without providing any explanation, they confiscated it and took it to a nearby police car. The two activists demanded it be returned.

At one point, they stood in front of the police car where the banner had been placed. They were rapidly surrounded by police, including officers from the AFP.

Footage posted online shows one of the protesters detained by a group of police officers on a median strip between two lanes of traffic. Later videos show her being threatened by police with capsicum spray on a footpath, before being tackled to the ground. She was then forcibly held down by up to four male officers.

Neither of the arrested protesters acted in a violent or threatening manner. None of the footage shows them

doing anything other than asserting their democratic right to peacefully protest, and demanding the return of their property.

Those arrested were Jacob Grech, a well-known activist, and a single mother of three children who has campaigned for a number of years in defence of Assange. They were taken to a nearby police station before being released.

According to social media reports, the female protester was released without charge. Grech was charged with resisting arrest and blocking a public highway.

The arrests are a serious attack on democratic rights aimed at intimidating supporters of WikiLeaks and preventing broader layers of the population from joining the campaign to demand Assange's freedom. The police action should be opposed by all defenders of democratic rights. The charges against Grech must be immediately withdrawn.

The official WikiLeaks Twitter account drew attention to the Melbourne arrests, as did a number of other prominent social media associated with the campaign to free Assange.

The police attack on the Melbourne rally followed AFP raids earlier this month against a News Corp journalist and the Sydney offices of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The raids were over the publication of articles exposing the Australian military's involvement in alleged war crimes in Afghanistan and secret government plans to expand domestic surveillance.

As WikiLeaks noted, the AFP raids were one indication that the Trump administration's unveiling last month of 17 Espionage Act charges against Assange had opened the floodgates for a stepped-up offensive against journalists and press freedom around

the world.

The raids underscored the dramatic erosion of democratic rights by successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. They followed the bipartisan passage of espionage and foreign interference laws last year, increasing penalties for government whistleblowers and providing for the charging and jailing of journalists accused of receiving and publishing “classified” documents.

The draconian legislation coincides with an ongoing expansion of police powers by state and federal governments, including to shut-down protests and gatherings, and to make arrests without charge.

The large police presence at the small Melbourne rally, and the aggressive arrests, further underscore the hostility to Assange in ruling circles.

Since 2010, federal Australian governments have refused to defend Assange, despite the fact that he is an Australian citizen and journalist.

In 2011, amid calls from senior US politicians for Assange’s assassination, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard denounced WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation and pledged to assist the attempts of the American intelligence agencies to destroy it. Every government since has collaborated in the US-led vendetta against Assange.

Since the WikiLeaks founder was expelled from the Ecuadorian embassy on April 11 and arrested by the British police, the Coalition government and the Labor opposition have stated only that Australia will provide unspecified “consular assistance” to the WikiLeaks founder.

This has done nothing to halt the US-led attacks against him, or to end his imprisonment in Belmarsh Prison, a maximum-security facility.

The open official hostility to Assange, and his abandonment by the Greens, the unions and a number of civil liberties organisations, stand in stark contrast to widespread support for the WikiLeaks founder among ordinary people.

Assange is viewed by many as a heroic figure, who is being persecuted for exposing war crimes. The refusal of the government to defend him is seen as an affront to democratic rights and an attempt to suppress any challenge to the US-Australian military alliance.

The widespread support for Assange has prompted nervousness within the political establishment.

In May, former Labor politician Bob Carr warned that Foreign Minister Marise Payne “needs to protect herself from the charge that she’s failed in her duty to protect the life of an Australian citizen.”

On Thursday, federal Labor senator Doug Cameron tweeted: “No matter what you think of @JulianAssange the possibility that he could face the death penalty in the USA is unacceptable. The government should intervene and provide high level political assistance and support. No Australian should face the possibility of the death penalty.”

Carr was foreign minister in the Gillard government as it participated in the US-led attacks against Assange. Cameron was also a member of that government. He did not speak out in defence of Assange until now, several weeks before he is due to retire from parliament.

Carr and Cameron are fearful of the development of a political movement of the working class in defence of Assange and democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build such a movement, including by calling rallies later this month in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, to demand that the Australian government take immediate action to secure Assange’s release and his return to Australia with a guarantee against extradition to the US.



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