SEP wins support for Assange and Manning at Sri Lanka's Peradeniya university

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Student for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka campaigned on June 25 in defence of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning at the University of Peradeniya in Kandy.

University and school students, academics, workers and school teachers expressed their support for the persecuted WikiLeaks founder and the courageous whistleblower. Discussion centred on the June 20 WSWS International Editorial Board statement "For a worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange's rendition to the US!"

Assange is being held in harsh conditions at London's Belmarsh prison, after being seized by police from Ecuador's embassy, where he was granted political asylum in 2012. The Trump administration is demanding his extradition from Britain to face concocted espionage charges that could result in life imprisonment or even execution. Manning has been jailed for bravely refusing to testify against Assange.

Tuesday's campaign began near Peradeniya university's agriculture faculty and included banners a literature table and a documentary video about Assange and the WSWS campaign for his defence since his first arrest in 2010.

Sashikala, a science student, told the WSWS she had seen media articles that portrayed Assange as a traitor who stole classified information from the US and other governments. "I now see that the allegations against Assange have been lies. Manning and Assange are heroes who revealed American war crimes to the world."

Medhavini, another science student, commented: "This is the first time I heard about Assange and Manning. I can't understand why the Sri Lankan media doesn't defend a journalist like Assange, and someone who revealed government crimes like Manning. It's a critical issue. It is correct to say that there is a link between the persecution of Assange and the ongoing attack on democracy in Sri Lanka."

Tenishan, an agriculture student, said: "I had a little information about Assange. Now I know the truth about him. He is a 'real man' of course. Is it democratic to imprison journalists who have revealed war crimes?"

At the nearby Galaha Junction dozens of school teachers and students visited the SEP-IYSSE campaign information table.

Basnayaka, a teacher, said she realised the significance of Assange's activity and WikiLeaks. "Other political parties are not concerned with defending democratic rights. What they do is suppress the truth."

S. Subawiththaran and **K. Annatheer**, two university students, were very interested in learning about the war crimes exposed by WikiLeaks and decided to buy the pamphlet *Socialism and the Fight Against War*.

At 4 p.m. SEP and IYSSE campaigners held a demonstration. Academics and non-academic university workers joined the protest. The participants chanted slogans, including "Freedom for Assange and Manning," "Oppose internet censorship," "Fight for international socialism" and "Hands off freedom of expression."

They also raised the issue of jailed Sri Lankan writer Shakthika Sathkumara who has been detained for nearly three months following false claims by Buddhist extremists that he denigrated Buddhism in a short story published on his Facebook page.

After the demonstration, SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena addressed the audience. His speech was translated into Tamil by M. Thevarajah,

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another political committee member.

Wijesiriwardena explained that the persecution of Assange and Manning was the sharpest expression of the rightward shift of the ruling classes internationally and their escalating attacks on basic rights. “In order to defend democratic rights, the working class must spearhead the fight to defend Assange,” he said.

The speaker drew attention to the escalating geopolitical tensions, including the US administration’s actions against Iran, which had brought the world to the brink of a third world war. “The material published by WikiLeaks has immensely contributed to raising the consciousness of the masses about the real face of the American imperialism and the threat of a world conflagration,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena said securing the freedom of Assange and Manning would be a blow to US imperialism and its allies, and a victory for the democratic rights of workers internationally. “Hence the importance of our call for the formation of a global defence committee to mobilise workers and all those who value democratic rights.”

Wijesiriwardena said events in Sri Lanka were part of a worldwide trend. “All the sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite knowingly allowed the terrorist bombing to happen on Easter Sunday in order to deploy the military and the police to workplaces, universities and the streets, armed with draconian anti-democratic powers.

“Peradeniya university students protested today against the installation of CCTV cameras that could be used to victimise student activists… All these attacks are ultimately aimed at the working class, which confronts austerity and anti-democratic measures.”

Several young people and workers gave their contact details to join the international campaign to free Assange.

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