

SEP (Australia) holds Sydney rally in defence of Assange and Manning

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held a powerful rally in Sydney on Saturday to demand freedom for imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The protest was one of a series being held by the SEP across the country. Further demonstrations will take place in Brisbane on July 6 and in Melbourne on July 14.

The events in Australia coincide with meetings, protests and rallies organised by the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Parties in Britain, France, Germany, Turkey, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and India against the attempt by the Trump administration to extradite Assange to the US.

The Sydney protest was attended by around 200 workers and youth. They included high school and university students, building and power workers, office staff, professionals and retirees. A number of longstanding supporters of Assange and WikiLeaks were in attendance.

Some of the protesters had travelled several hours to attend. One person had made the journey from Alice Springs, a distance of almost 3,000 kilometres. The rally was streamed live to an international audience on Facebook. It has been viewed more than 4,000 times.

Linda Tenenbaum, a longstanding SEP national committee member, chaired the protest. She stressed that it was part of an international campaign, based on the perspective outlined in a WSWs international editorial board statement calling for the formation of a Global Defence Committee to coordinate worldwide actions in defence of Assange and Manning.

“Just as the ruling elites have escalated their persecution of Julian Assange, our response must be to escalate the fight for his freedom, and that of Chelsea Manning, who has been imprisoned indefinitely in the US for courageously refusing to give testimony against Assange,” Tenenbaum declared.

She stressed that the aim of this campaign was “oriented to arousing and mobilizing the international working class, the overwhelming majority of the population and the most powerful social force on the planet, to defend Assange and Manning, and the democratic and social rights of all workers.”

Tenenbaum read a statement to the rally by Mark Davis, a Walkley Award winning investigative journalist.

Davis, who was unable to attend due to family responsibilities, warned: “The attacks on Assange are an attack on all of us, and on our political sovereignty.”

He stated: “Only a movement of ordinary Australians can save Julian now. It is becoming clear that Australian journalists and media will not promote his cause for their own, often bizarre reasons. But all of us can, and should object to an Australian being dragged in chains to another country on contrived, security charges.”

James Ricketson, a well-known documentary filmmaker, spoke about his own experiences of being imprisoned in Cambodia on bogus espionage charges.

Ricketson, who was freed last year after a public campaign in his defence, recounted that he had witnessed the death of another Australian citizen in a Cambodian jail. The Australian government had rejected appeals for it to intervene on behalf of the man.

Ricketson stated that for months, “the Australian government didn’t do anything to help me. But in March, 2017, after 100,000 people had signed a petition defending me, and after journalists had written extensively on my case, it was clear to the Australian government that I was a potential embarrassment. For me to die in prison would have been a public relations disaster.”

It was only then, Ricketson said, that the government intervened on his behalf.

“What is required is that a huge number of Australians realise, not only that Assange should not be extradited to

the US, where it is highly likely he will die in jail, but also, that if Assange is extradited, it will send a chilling message to the entire Fourth Estate,” he stated.

Ricketson concluded by noting that some of the initial demonstrations against the Vietnam war in the 1960s were attended by only several hundred people. “Eventually, it got to the point where there were several hundred thousand people in the streets. That’s what we should be aiming for.”

Oscar Grenfell, a WSWS correspondent and convenor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, declared: “We’re here to take a stand against one of the most monstrous political witch-hunts in modern history.” He reviewed the eight-year international conspiracy against Assange, which had involved the US, British, Swedish, Ecuadorian and Australian governments.

Grenfell warned that the British court hearings over Assange’s extradition would take place in a “kangaroo court” determined to send him to the “US war criminals and CIA torturers WikiLeaks has done so much to expose.”

The SEP speaker exposed the role of successive Australian governments in the persecution of Assange. They had refused to defend him, despite the fact that he was an Australian citizen, because of their commitment to the US military alliance and to cover-up their own anti-democratic actions against the Australian population.

Grenfell denounced the abandonment of Assange by the Greens, the unions and pseudo-left groups. He stressed that a movement to free Assange needed to be based in the working class.

Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees, the former head of the Sydney Peace Foundation and a prominent defender of democratic rights, also spoke. He contrasted the demonisation of Assange with the lauding of Jim Molan, a former Australian army general who led coalition forces in Iraq during the bombardment of Fallujah.

Rees declared that Assange was being persecuted for exposing such war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the “rules and rationale behind the torture” of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Assange had also exposed human rights abuses and spying operations conducted by the Chinese and Russian governments, and the semi-criminal activities of major financial institutions.

The professor listed a series of prominent public figures who had spoken out in defence of the WikiLeaks founder, including Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Chris Hedges. He called for an end to the official silence on Assange’s

plight, and for further actions in his defence.

Nick Beams, a decades-long leader of the Trotskyist movement, stated that the persecution of Assange had “opened the way for sweeping attacks on journalism” around the world.

Beams explained that the accelerating assault on democratic rights was a product of the escalating drive to war by the US and the other imperialist powers. “There is an irrepressible impetus emanating from the highest levels of the US administration and the military and intelligence establishment for war,” he warned.

“Their incarceration and torture is the very centre, the spearhead, of the drive by all the US and other imperialist governments to impose dictatorship and crush all opposition as they prepare for war. Therefore, the world working class, the overwhelming mass of the population, must make their defence the focus of a great counter-offensive against dictatorship and war,” he declared.

Beams explained that it was necessary to draw “the connection between the frame-up and incarceration of Assange and Manning, the drive to war, and all the great social and political issues now before working people.”

To applause, he concluded: “We must set our goals high. If two million people can come out on the streets of Hong Kong against extradition legislation, then we can surely build such a mass popular movement on a global scale to free Assange and Manning.”



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