

Julian Assange's birthday celebrated at vigils in Australia and New Zealand

**Our reporters
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Hundreds of people participated in vigils in towns and cities across Australia and New Zealand on Wednesday to mark WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's forty-eighth birthday. The gatherings were part of a worldwide mobilisation that included events in 59 cities around the world.

Assange is being held in Britain's maximum security Belmarsh Prison. He faces the prospect of extradition to the US on 17 Espionage Act charges carrying a maximum sentence of 175 years imprisonment for WikiLeaks' exposure of US war crimes and global diplomatic intrigues.

Two events were held in Melbourne, where Assange went to university and spent much of his young adulthood. A vigil during the day was addressed by John Shipton, Assange's father, and Greg Barns, one of his Australian legal advisors.

Shipton told several dozen protesters: "It is his birthday, so a moment of happiness for Julian who is banged up in Belmarsh prison. We received a note from him yesterday saying how much he appreciates the support of everybody in Melbourne. This is his hometown and he went to university here. His children are here—my grandchildren. So it's a very special place for Julian."

Shipton declared: "The obscene criminality of institutions ensuring that a man who has just revealed war crimes be locked up for 175 years—in other words, for life—is something that motivates us to understand that Julian is an icon of the oppression of free press."

Evrin Yazgin, a member of the Socialist Equality Party, also spoke. He explained that the persecution of Assange and the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning is an attack on "democratic rights and freedom of speech for all."

Yazgin noted that the jailing of Assange had opened

the floodgates for a crackdown on journalists internationally. He referred to the Australian Federal Police raids of journalists last month, over articles exposing Australian war crimes in Afghanistan and plans for expanded government surveillance.

Yazgin warned that the silencing of Assange was part of the preparation for new crimes, including US preparations for war with Iran, China, Russia and other powers. He pointed to the resurgence of working class struggles internationally, and declared: "What is required to free Assange, Manning and other persecuted whistleblowers and journalists is the building of a movement of workers and youth internationally, from below."

Yazgin invited everyone at the vigil to attend an SEP rally in Melbourne, outside the State Library of Victoria, 328 Swanston Street, at 2 p.m. on July 14 to demand freedom for Assange.

Around 50 people participated in a vigil outside Sydney Town Hall, organised by the Support Assange and WikiLeaks Coalition.

Helen Rose, a well-known artist, chaired the event. She said Assange was being pursued by governments because he "used his brilliant mind to create an online platform where whistleblowers" could "deliver proof via documents naming names of those in positions of great power, who commit large-scale impact crimes."

Rose recounted her visits to Assange at Ecuador's London embassy. She outlined the dire conditions he faced there, including extensive surveillance, and pointed to the WikiLeaks founder's resilience and courage.

Wendy Bacon, a prominent journalist, said the 2010 WikiLeaks exposures of the US occupation of Iraq had "reverberated around the world" and dealt a "body blow to the US security state."

Bacon pointed to WikiLeaks' unblemished publishing record and denounced claims that Assange is not a journalist. She concluded: "What this is about is whether journalists who publish information in the public interest are criminals. They are not."

Dr Lissa Johnson, a clinical psychologist and journalist, reviewed the findings of UN official Nils Melzer, who released a report in May warning that Assange was being subjected to "psychological torture."

Johnson noted that the attacks on the WikiLeaks founder had vast implications for democratic rights, declaring: "Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning are the bodies strung up in the town square as a warning to all: keep your mouths shut."

Rebecca McGlone, a friend of the WikiLeaks founder's family, told the vigil: "We need to free Julian Assange. We need to free the rights of all citizens to report crimes committed by corporations and governments without being prosecuted, and destroy forever the idea that only the press or parliaments have special privileges."

Linda Tenenbaum, a longstanding leader of the Socialist Equality Party, sent greetings to Assange on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP. She indicted the Liberal-National government and the entire political and media establishment for abandoning Assange, an Australia citizen.

Tenenbaum declared: "Just a few days ago, Prime Minister Scott Morrison wined and dined with President Donald Trump, but refused to even mention Assange's name, so complicit is he in the Trump Administration's drive to bury Assange forever in a US prison."

The SEP speaker explained that the WSWs international editorial board had initiated a Global Defence Committee to coordinate international actions in defence of Assange and Manning.

Tenenbaum stated: "This international initiative will be oriented to arousing and mobilising the most powerful social force on the face of the planet, the international working class, the vast majority of the world's population. We must bring the fight to free Assange to the factories, the schools and universities, to working class towns and suburbs across the globe."

In New Zealand, WikiLeaks supporters from Free Assange NZ organised protest vigils outside the US

embassy in Wellington and the US consulate in Auckland.

Alex Hills, of Free Assange NZ, denounced the New Zealand Labour government's push for greater censorship of the internet in collaboration with right-wing French President Emmanuel Macron. "They say they're censoring hate, but what they're really doing is shutting down, censoring and algorithming out our voices," she said.

Victoria Quade, a former journalist, quoted Australian journalist Mary Kostakidis' statement to the WSWs that the persecution of Assange "was never about a Swedish sex case, it was never about jumping bail. It was always about extradition to the US. It was always about revenge. It was always about our right to know."

Tom Peters of the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) stated that as an ally of the US, Australia and the UK, and a participant in the criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, New Zealand's ruling elite supports the persecution of Assange for exposing US war crimes. "What is happening to Assange is an example of class justice: It is the actions of gangsters and war criminals who are seeking to cover up their own crimes," he said.

Peters called for an intensification of the international fight to free Assange and urged supporters of free speech to attend the SEG's rally in Wellington on July 14, at 2:30 p.m., at the intersection of Cuba Street and Left Bank.



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