

SEP (Australia) holds rally in Brisbane to demand freedom for Assange and Manning

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Last Saturday, July 6, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held its first rally in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, as part of the international campaign by the *World Socialist Web Site* to defend and free WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Despite downpours of rain and gusts of wind, more than 40 workers and young people joined the rally in the centre of the city, demonstrating the underlying support for Assange and Manning against the opposition of the political and corporate elite. Participants came from as far afield as Rockhampton in central Queensland, Mullumbimby in northern New South Wales and Russell Island, off the Queensland coast.

Chairing the rally, Ellen Wells, a member of the SEP for four decades, drew attention to the statement issued by the WSWs, the political voice of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated parties throughout the world, for the formation of a Global Defense Committee to organise and coordinate the international fight to bring to an end the persecution of Julian Assange and secure his freedom.

Wells emphasised the need to urgently step up the demand for the Australian government to “carry out its legal and diplomatic obligations to this heroic Australian journalist and citizen, and repatriate him to Australia.”

Speaking on behalf of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the SEP’s youth movement, Michael Smith said: “For many in my generation, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning are heroes. Both have been prepared to sacrifice everything in order to reveal the war crimes and corporate abuses that governments and big business have tried to hide from view.”

Smith explained: “Young people are increasingly realising that this corporate profit-driven system has nothing for us but more criminal wars, coup plots, dictatorships, climate disaster and mass surveillance.”

WSWS correspondent Oscar Grenfell reviewed the imprisonment of Assange and Manning and highlighted the relationship between this US-led operation, the mounting police attacks on journalists and the increasing turn by governments worldwide to authoritarian forms of rule.

The final speaker, longstanding SEP national committee member Mike Head, drew out the connection between the acceleration of the attack on Assange and Manning since Assange’s arrest on April 11 and the growing danger of war confronting the working class, most recently shown by the US President Donald Trump’s near-missile strike on Iran.

As with previous SEP rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, the speakers emphasised that the attacks on Assange and Manning were driven by the capitalist class’s need to suppress struggles internationally against austerity and war. Only the working class, fighting internationally with a socialist perspective, could free Assange and Manning and defeat the attacks on basic democratic rights.

Numerous passersby expressed their support for the rally. Hundreds of leaflets containing the call for the global defense committee were distributed. The audience listened attentively to the speakers, and lively discussions followed.

Zameel, an aged care worker, said he came to the rally because it was “absolutely the right thing to do” and that he believed that every worker needed to know about Assange and Manning, and defend them. “Workers can’t solve any of their problems without knowing what’s going on in the world,” he said,

pointing to the importance of the exposures published by WikiLeaks.

He said he opposed capitalism, saying: “I can get behind the idea of workers all coming together and building a better future.” He gave his support to internationalism and the SEP’s opposition to militarism and the persecution of immigrants and refugees, saying that he felt very strongly about this as he had friends and family from the Middle East.

Anthony journeyed from Rockhampton, 500 kilometres north of Brisbane, to take part in the rally. “You guys [SEP] are the only ones actually doing something to defend Assange, and I felt I needed to take part,” he explained. Asked about the shift away from Assange by layers of the upper-middle class who had defended him seven years earlier, Anthony pointed out that Central Queensland University, located in Rockhampton, had initially sought to incorporate Assange, one of its former students, into its advertising in 2011, only to remain silent following his arrest.

Fiona who travelled from northern New South Wales, was especially appreciative of the rally, stating her agreement with all the points raised by the SEP speakers. She was strongly opposed to the corporate media’s campaign to abandon and slander Assange, and felt that defending Assange was “as black-and-white an issue as you can possibly get; you can’t possibly compromise on it.”

Fiona also supported the SEP’s opposition to all the parliamentary parties. “This is the only party I’ve seen that defends Assange and Manning, and the only party that clearly and obviously stands up for the working class.”

Sahyma said she was opposed to the attacks on Assange and Manning because their persecution would result “in the end of our freedoms if they are imprisoned.” Commenting on the abandonment of Assange by the political and media establishment in Australia, she said: “If they won’t do it, then it’s up to us, the people, to defend Assange.” She was also hostile to the military buildup now underway in the US, and strongly registered her opposition to militarism.

Skye, a teachers’ aide, specialising in special needs, and an art and social science teacher, said she came to the rally to oppose “the suppression of the truth in a society that claims to be a democracy but not longer is, nor has ever been.

“I’m concerned for my children, who are in high school and primary school. Being a single mother and teachers’ aide and teacher, I know that within the system itself there is corruption and control. It’s all about money, and democracy is dead. That worries me. We don’t really have the freedom that we’ve been misled to believe that we do. I want to do my best to create a better world for my children and everyone else’s children.”

Skye drew a connection to the waves of teachers’ strikes in the US and internationally. “From my perspective as a teacher’s aide and working as a teacher, it is a very frustrating job because of the way that governments have suppressed the truth to maintain control, so that we can’t meet the needs of the individual. As an educator I believe that is just one prime example of the overall problem here. Governments are trying to control the masses. There’s no individual, there’s no democracy, there’s no freedom of speech, the same as in the classroom.

“And if you don’t conform as a student and meet the criteria set by the system then you’re lost, you’re shunned, you’re pushed out into unemployment or low-income.”

Skye said Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard had initiated the support of every subsequent Australian government for the US operation to imprison Julian Assange. “It served her agenda. America had her by the neck... That will always be the way it is, unless something changes. It’s not a matter of who’s in power. It’s the way the system works.

“Julian Assange is a threat to the agenda of all the parties. Free Julian Assange! Don’t shoot the messenger! He’s a legend and I believe in what he’s standing for. He is a beautiful human being.”



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