

Rally in Melbourne demands freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters
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About 130 people rallied yesterday in central Melbourne to demand the immediate and unconditional freedom of imprisoned WikiLeaks' publisher Julian Assange and US military-intelligence whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The event was part of the international campaign by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world to fight for the freedom of Assange and Manning. It followed a rally held in Sydney two weeks earlier, and was held on the same day as the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) staged a protest in Wellington, New Zealand.

Those attending the Melbourne protest included workers, retirees, and university students. Some were taking part in their first demonstration in support of Assange and Manning, while others were participating after previously supporting SEP-organised rallies in defence of democratic rights.

Several participants travelled long distances, including students who came from the regional city of Geelong and from Wangaratta, near the border with New South Wales, 250 kilometres away. Attendees stayed for the entire rally, despite the cold and rain.

An international audience participated in the event through a Facebook livestream, which has currently been viewed over 3,600 times. Hundreds of others registered their support on Twitter and other social media.

SEP National Committee member Patrick O'Connor chaired the rally. He began by reporting on the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International for the formation of a Global Defense Committee to stop Assange's extradition to the US.

Urging participants to sign up, O'Connor explained: "The purpose of the committee is to mobilise the

enormous support that Assange enjoys within the international working class into mass action for his release from prison."

O'Connor also read out an expression of gratitude to rally participants sent to the SEP by Christine Assange, Julian's mother, as well as a statement of solidarity issued to the Melbourne and Sydney rallies by Terry Hicks, father of former Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks.

Evrin Yazgin, SEP member and president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Melbourne, spoke about the trumped-up character of the charges and accusations levelled against Assange by the American and Swedish authorities.

He denounced the "kangaroo court" prepared for the British extradition hearings, saying: "That will be presided over by Judge Emma Arbuthnot, whose husband is a reactionary Tory politician. Between 2005 and 2014, he was the chair of the Defence Select Committee, the body overseeing the Ministry of Defence and Britain's armed forces. During this period, Britain had been involved in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the wars for regime change in Libya and Syria.

"James Arbuthnot features more than 50 times in cables published by WikiLeaks. Assange is to be tried by those he has exposed. According to the 'Guide to Judicial Conduct' in England and Wales, published in 2018, Arbuthnot cannot preside over the hearing of Assange as a non-independent individual and should have automatically recused—that is, excused—herself on this basis."

Jason Wardle, president of the IYSSE at Victoria University and one of the SEP's Senate candidates in Victoria for the last federal election, spoke about the

impact of WikiLeaks' work on the younger generations. "For many people in my generation, we look up to Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning as figures of heroism and courage," he said. "They have both been prepared to sacrifice everything in order to reveal to us what has been going on behind closed doors. Thanks to them, young people now know the details of the dirty war crimes and corporate abuses that governments and big business have tried to hide from view."

Jacob Grech, of the Melbourne WikiLeaks Support group, also addressed the rally, conveying greetings on behalf of John Shipton, Assange's father, who he had spoken with earlier that day. Shipton two weeks earlier had been able to visit Julian in Belmarsh Prison, where his health continues to be visibly at risk. "Thank you to all the people here," Grech said, "because coming out to events like this today in Melbourne in this weather give Julian strength. This means something to him."

Grech stated that the defence of Assange was a "working-class issue," adding: "It's about recognising the power structures that keep information out of the hands of working people, to maintain control by the elite."

The rally's main speaker was SEP assistant national secretary Cheryl Crisp, who reviewed in detail the extraordinary, anti-democratic railroading of Assange since his forced removal from the Ecuadorian embassy.

"What is clear from the events outlined is that Julian Assange's expulsion and arrest on April 11 has opened the floodgates for attacks on journalistic and media freedom and on democratic rights as a whole," Crisp explained. "The unrelenting pursuit and persecution of Assange and Manning was to both intimidate these two class war prisoners and all those who not only tell the truth but make that truth available to the world's population."

She continued: "We must not forget that it was the exposure of war crimes of the US and their allies, including Australia, that has enraged these governments. They set the hounds loose to ensure that the development of the fight against war is suppressed and silenced. There was no concern about the journalists and other innocents killed in the [Iraq War] 'Collateral Murder' video—only that it was released and exposed."

Crisp pointed to the Trump administration's threats

to wage war against Iran, and the discussion now underway within ruling circles in Canberra over whether Australian imperialism ought to develop a nuclear weapons arsenal.

"The right to the truth, to information, is a revolutionary question. If the experience of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning tells us anything it is that," she concluded. "We call on you all to go to your workplaces, to your communities and neighbourhoods, to your families and friends, and to those you don't yet know, to explain and educate and convince them of the profoundly significant task of freeing Julian Assange. This means countering the lies and falsifications flung against Assange, including that he is not a journalist, he is not a publisher and WikiLeaks is not a media organisation.

"The fight for his freedom has to become the rallying cry of millions because he has stood intransigent and steadfast, for he knows to do otherwise would weaken not just him but the mass of people globally for whom he fights. We are confident that a mass movement can and will be built that will force open the doors of Belmarsh Prison and Alexandria Detention Centre to secure the rightful freedom for Assange and Manning."

Numbers of rally participants afterwards signed up to join the Global Defence Committee for Julian Assange, purchased literature and t-shirts, and spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters.

The authors also recommend:

Melbourne rally participants speak in defence of Assange and Manning

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