

SEG (New Zealand) holds rally in defence of Assange and Manning

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group held a rally on Sunday in Cuba Street, central Wellington, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International's worldwide campaign to demand freedom for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The event drew an attentive audience, despite being held just after a torrential rainstorm. It followed protests organised by Socialist Equality Parties in Britain, Sri Lanka and Australia in recent weeks, and coincided with a rally in Melbourne.

Long-standing SEG member and WSWs correspondent John Braddock opened the rally, declaring that "Assange and Manning, who are currently in prison on either side of the Atlantic, are victims of a monstrous criminal conspiracy, involving the most powerful governments in the world, the intelligence agencies and their mouthpieces in the corporate media."

Assange is facing extradition from Britain to the US, with a possible 170-year prison sentence for the "crime" of publishing leaked documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Washington's corrupt and thuggish diplomacy throughout the world. Manning, who provided the documents to WikiLeaks in 2010, has been re-imprisoned in the US for refusing to testify against Assange.

Braddock refuted the slander that Assange is "not a journalist," repeated by corporate media pundits such as Peter Greste in Australia and Richard Harman in New Zealand. He quoted Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers that exposed the real role of US forces in the Vietnam War. Ellsberg defended Assange, stating that "every attack now made on WikiLeaks and Julian Assange was made against me and the release of the Pentagon Papers at the time."

The speaker said recent Australian police raids targeting journalists, who had published leaked information about war crimes in Afghanistan and state surveillance, confirmed the *World Socialist Web Site's* warnings that "the persecution and jailing of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is setting a precedent for the criminalisation of journalism itself."

Leading SEG member Tom Peters explained that the ruling elite was persecuting Assange and Manning, censoring the internet and attacking democratic rights, as part of preparations to confront growing working class opposition to austerity and war.

"It is no accident that the WikiLeaks founder faces rendition to the United States, for exposing war crimes, at the same time as the Trump administration has threatened to start a war against Iran," he said. "Such a war would threaten to drag in Russia and other nuclear-armed powers, placing the entire world in danger."

He called for the mobilisation of the working class internationally to demand the release of Assange and Manning. "We are not making moral appeals to those in power. Rather, our campaign is directed towards mobilising working people, by explaining that the attack on WikiLeaks is an attack on their right to know the truth about the crimes of capitalist governments."

Tom Kelly, an organiser of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Victoria University of Wellington, said "to continue to strangle our future, the rapacious capitalist elite must also strangle our access to information. As Julian Assange said, 'If wars can be started by lies, peace can be started by truth.'"

He denounced New Zealand's Labour Party-NZ First-Greens government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, which had said "nothing of the US and UK's abuse of immigrants, vast social inequality or attacks on journalism."

He noted: “Labour has its own reasons to hate WikiLeaks, after it was exposed in leaked US government cables to have sent soldiers to Iraq to secure a lucrative UN contract for [New Zealand dairy company] Fonterra.” Labour and the right-wing nationalist NZ First are cementing New Zealand’s alliance with the US and spending billions on military upgrades to prepare for the next war.

Peters read greetings sent to the rally by Alex Hills, organiser of the Free Assange NZ campaign. Free Assange NZ has organised many protests in defence of the WikiLeaks founder, including the recent international Candles4Assange events to mark his birthday.

“The birthday vigils around the world illustrated to us that we are *far* from alone and that there is a huge groundswell of passionate support for WikiLeaks and Julian Assange,” Hills said. She denounced the media for spending “over a decade smearing Julian—lies without evidence—and my only conclusion is that they do this because they themselves have been exposed as moonlighting for the military industrial complex instead of holding governments to account.”

Hills quoted UN special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer’s powerful statement that Assange had been the victim of a “relentless smear campaign... dehumanized through isolation, ridicule and shame, just like the witches we used to burn at the stake.” This was done, Melzer stated, “to divert attention from the crimes he exposed.”

Members and supporters of the SEG spoke to those attending the rally, distributed the WSWs statement “For a worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange’s rendition to the US!” and signed several people up to the international defence committee for Assange.

Markus, a student, said he had come to learn more about Assange since he did not know much about his plight. He defended WikiLeaks strongly, saying “it should exist to such an extent that you can’t be a war criminal: that’s the function of the media.” He rejected claims that WikiLeaks had acted “irresponsibly” by releasing secret documents without vetting them, saying “the media is not supposed to be biased, but just to put information out there.”

Hassan a software engineer, originally from Morocco, said: “We have many examples of how governments deal with opposition, how they illegally jail people, but

I never expected to see this from a Western democratic government.” He found it “astonishing” that the imprisonment of Assange was happening “at the same time that they are telling countries like Russia and China to respect human rights.”

He was shocked to hear that the persecution of Assange and Manning was “part of a bigger plan for a new war.” He urged WSWs readers to support WikiLeaks, saying: “Put yourself in the shoes of a victim in Iraq or Afghanistan, or Guatemala or Chile. We are all human, and when I see a woman crying on TV, I think: I would cry the same way if I had been the victim of the same actions. I hope truth prevails and those who are responsible for atrocities around the world are taken to trial.”

The author also recommends:

Free Assange NZ denounces hypocrisy at World Press Freedom Day event
[11 May 2019]

Julian Assange’s birthday celebrated at vigils in Australia and New Zealand
[5 July 2019]



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