

Protests in Australia continue to break official silence on Julian Assange

Our reporters
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Over the past weeks, there have been growing indications in Australia of popular support for Julian Assange and opposition to the attempts to extradite him from Britain to the US, where the WikiLeaks founder faces the prospect of life imprisonment for exposing American war crimes.

Last Sunday, prominent supporters of Assange rallied in Sydney, in opposition to the welcome given to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo by the Liberal-National Coalition government, the Labor Party opposition and the entire political establishment.

Despite briefings by Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's lawyers, in Canberra last week, no political party or parliamentarian, including from the Greens, has issued a statement defending Assange or demanding that the US end its pursuit of him.

At the Sydney protest, Assange's father John Shipton condemned the Australian government's refusal to even raise the issue of Assange with Pompeo, declaring: "Silence is complicity." Shipton branded the US secretary of state as a "warmonger," and in comments to the WSWWS stressed the importance of ordinary people taking action in support of Assange.

Mary Kostakidis, a well-known Australian journalist, outlined the significance of the dismissal last week of a civil case against Assange brought by the US Democratic National Committee (DNC).

Kostakidis stated that the verdict was a damning refutation of claims that Assange colluded with Russia to undermine the presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton in 2016. She cited the ruling, stating that WikiLeaks' 2016 publications, exposing Clinton and the DNC, "deserved the highest First Amendment protections."

The journalist declared that a successful US prosecution of Assange under the Espionage Act would

have "frightful repercussions for press freedom around the world."

"We need Australian media to also recognise the importance of this case," Kostakidis said. "Whether they support the individual or not, whether they like his personality or not, is irrelevant, as it is in all human rights cases."

James Ricketson, an Australian documentary filmmaker, reviewed his own experiences, being convicted and imprisoned on bogus espionage charges by the Cambodian government. He stated that the Australian government had only taken action in his defence, after it was compelled to do so by public pressure.

Significantly, Ricketson stated that Assange had provided timely and useful advice to him that aided in his release from prison last year. The filmmaker exposed the various pretexts used to justify the persecution of Assange, noting that he had been demonised and scapegoated "like refugees and immigrants have been."

The rally followed other actions and initiatives in support of Assange.

A crowd-funded campaign established by designer Somerset Bean to print and display posters urging people to lobby government representatives to free Assange has raised more than \$20,000 in three months, well in excess of the initial goal of \$5,500. The campaign has been extended to include "Bring Assange Home" billboards displayed on trucks driving around Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane.

A *change.org* petition started by Phillip Adams, calling on the Australian government to prevent the extradition of Assange to the US, has attracted over 165,000 signatures.

On July 26, a group of Assange supporters displayed

a “Free Assange” banner at the Melbourne Cricket Ground during an Australian rules football game attended by 78,722, and viewed on television by more than 300,000. The supporters were ejected from the ground by security.

At the “Splendour in the Grass” music festival held in northern New South Wales between July 19 and 21, “Bring Assange Home” posters and banners were displayed alongside stalls signing up supporters, and offering information, t-shirts, and other merchandise, eagerly taken up by large numbers of young people attending the festival.

“Splendour in the Grass” has a long association with Assange and WikiLeaks. In 2011 and 2013 Assange addressed the festival via pre-recorded videos. In the 2011 video, Assange told festival-goers, “This generation is burning the mass media to the ground. We’re reclaiming our rights to world history. We are ripping open secret archives from Washington to Cairo.”

On July 27 and 28, Assange supporters from the groups DisarmEverywhere and Melbourne4Wiki ran an information and merchandise stall at the Echuca-Moama Winter Blues Festival, held in the border towns of Echuca, Victoria and Moama, New South Wales.

The previous week, Free Assange Central Queensland group, based in Rockhampton, held a protest demanding Assange’s freedom outside the offices of National Party Senator Matt Canavan. The group also operated a stall as part of the recent 5G symposium in Brisbane.

In South Australia, Helen Lawrie wrote a song entitled “USA Get Out Go Home,” condemning the US pursuit of the WikiLeaks founder. Together with Sue Shepherd and Phil Davies, Lawrie performed the song at Rundle Mall in central Adelaide.

The Socialist Equality Party has continued to win broad support for the defence of Assange in working-class suburbs of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. SEP branches have recently held a series of forums, drawing out the relationship between the attacks against Assange and the escalating drive to war.

Adriana, a high school student in Sydney, said she attended one of the forums, because “I believe that what’s happened with Julian Assange is just an example of what could happen many more times. It’s intimidation by the government, intimidation not to

speak out and be free in conversation. I believe it’s important to highlight these issues so that we do have the democratic right to speak the truth about what’s going on in this political climate.

“It’s an attack on free speech, it’s an attack on the working class, it’s an attack on being able to express yourself and being able to understand the workings and the structure of the government and what they have been doing. I believe it’s part of the preparation and strategy for another war.

“As a student you aren’t given the natural opportunity to learn so you have to seek that out yourself. We are the next generation, we are the people who make the next moves in history and we are slowly becoming more progressive and more knowledgeable about what’s going on.”

Muhammed, a warehouse worker, stated: “Assange was only trying to express his democratic rights as a human being, so he should be freed. I think workers should defend Assange because we all live in a democratic society. As a worker, you too have a right to express your own opinion, but if Assange is not free, it means you cannot. You will be pushed to the corner.

“What the government is doing behind people’s backs is not fair, as a government you should not be doing something that is against the people.”

Asked about the drive to war and threat of war with Iran, Muhammed said, “I wouldn’t want any government to start new wars. We’ve had enough war. What we should campaign for now is a global movement for peace in the whole world.

“Going to war will mean more suffering, it will create more unrest, economic hardship, and social insecurity for the working class. We should be thinking about children, women, the most vulnerable people in society. We don’t want those people to suffer. The working class must stand tall and act for the release of Julian Assange!”



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