

Socialist Equality Party wins support for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning at Manchester Peterloo Massacre commemoration

Our reporters
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On Saturday, around 500 people attended a rally at the site of St Peter's Field, Manchester, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre. Feeder marchers from cities and towns throughout the northwest of England were organised, including Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Salford, Middleton and Ancoats, reprising the original route of the Peterloo marchers.

On August 16, 1819, cotton workers and their families marched into Manchester from the outlying districts, to demand representation in parliament. The reformer and weaver Samuel Bamford, who led the Middleton contingent, wrote in his memoirs:

"First were selected twelve of the most decent-looking youths, who were placed at the front, each with a branch of laurel held in his hand, as a token of peace; then the colours: a blue one of silk, with inscriptions in golden letters, 'Unity and Strength', 'Liberty and Fraternity'; a green one of silk, with golden letters, 'Parliaments Annual', 'Suffrage Universal'."

The peaceful protest met with the full fury of the state. The riot act was read but was inaudible to the crowd on St Peter's Field that had swelled to between 60,000 and 100,000. The cavalry, consisting of yeomenry and regular soldiers, charged with sabres drawn, killing at least 18.

"In ten minutes from the commencement of the havoc," wrote Bamford, "the field was an open and almost deserted space...over the whole field were strewn caps, bonnets, hats, shawls, and shoes, and other parts of male and female dress, trampled, torn, and bloody."

"Several mounds of human flesh still remained where they had fallen, crushed down and smothered. Some of these still groaning, others with staring eyes, were gasping for breath, and others would never breathe more."

The exact number of casualties remains unknown, but it is estimated that some 400-700 were injured. In the immediate aftermath, there followed arrests of the march ringleaders, including Henry Hunt and Bamford, and their imprisonment. Repression saw mass censorship with radical newspapers, including the *Manchester Observer*, shut down.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners distributed the WSWs article, "*200 years since the Peterloo massacre*" at the commemoration rally, and the call "For a worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange's rendition to the US!"

Michael, who is a veteran of the Army and Medical Services, told a WSWs reporter he was in Manchester for a "committee meeting of the Veterans for Peace for the North West." When they saw the Peterloo commemoration, they decided to join the rally.

"I was never taught about Peterloo at school," he said. "It was only until I saw the film on Peterloo by Mike Leigh that I decided to find out about it."

Michael said that the working class still had to struggle for basic democratic rights today as in 1819. Taking a leaflet on the international campaign to free Assange and US whistleblower Chelsea Manning, he said, "If Julian gets sent to the United States, that's the end of free speech. If you silence people speaking the truth, it makes it a police state."

Retiree John Clarke from Ireland said he had been "very active in the Birmingham Six campaign [six Irish men falsely imprisoned for 16 years for the 1975 Birmingham pub bombings, who were later exonerated]."

"I believe we should be remembering those people who were slain in 1819, just like demonstrators in Ireland

against British oppression on Bloody Sunday, where a similar number were killed by the British army [28 unarmed civilians were shot dead while protesting against internment in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1972].

“Remembering both who lost their lives at Peterloo and in Derry, we should remember that without these early protests we wouldn’t have the limited democratic rights we now enjoy.”

John was emphatic that Julian Assange, whose democratic rights have been abrogated by the governments of the UK, Ecuador, the US and Australia, should be freed immediately.

“He should be freed unless charged with evidence,” said John. “It’s terrible that he was trapped for so long.”

Sharon attended the rally with her daughter, Lillian. She said, “What happened then could happen now. ... Especially with all the unemployment. We need to appreciate that the rights we have now, people fought for, people died for.

“People are trying to work from the inside [the system],” she continued, “And you can’t. You can’t work from the inside out, its broken, everything is broken.”

Carol said, “[The Peterloo protesters] came together peacefully, for democracy, and got killed for it,” she said. “What’s different today? Yes, we’ve got the vote, but the things going on in the world with Trump and Johnson, they’d think nothing of mowing us down in the street. They would enjoy it.

“The saddest thing for me today was when I read the commentary at the memorial for Peterloo, which is beautiful. They sent in first [to massacre the protesters] the volunteers [yeomanry] from Manchester and Salford, and don’t think they won’t do that again. If they can get away with it, they will.

“Things have moved on. People live in nicer housing, but the poverty levels are astronomical. And people are dying in the streets because they have nowhere to live. It’s always the working class who come together when times are hard. ... They didn’t even come armed [to St Peter’s Field]. They were just cut down like they were nobody.”

In relation to the old “left” Labour Party leaders, Carol, who described herself as a historian and socialist, said, “Michael Foot and Tony Benn—for all their radical talk—that’s what it was, radical talk.

“Assange and [whistleblower Chelsea] Manning have been locked up for telling the truth and putting out a different message to the mainstream. I don’t think people

realise how dangerous it is for the people who are active. They’ll do their best to shut you down. I’ll never stop saying what I think, never ever.”

Andrea said that Assange and Manning should be defended because “it’s all about the democracy we should have but we obviously haven’t. It’s a tragedy that they’ve got Assange locked up in prison when he’s not well. He can’t get the support he needs, he can’t reach out to people, it’s horrendous.

“I’ve followed Assange for years, and I’ve read a lot about him. It’s all about what America was doing in Iraq, what these wars are about. I’ve just come back from a Stop the War Coalition meeting to campaign to stop any further action with Iran, and it’s the exact same thing.

“There’s worldwide support for Assange. What he’s done has made people realise what the Americans and UK have done in these countries. They call it war, but it’s invasions of these countries, and thousands of innocent people are being killed.

“Assange and people like him need support. He’s done nothing wrong. I saw the images of him being dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy, and it was so sad to see him looking like that. I hope the campaign is successful and he’s not transported over to America. He was in the embassy for years, and you tend to forget that this individual is still suffering and fighting a battle to prevent extradition to America.

“With Trump and Boris [Johnson] joining together, there’s a big threat of him being extradited. I hope we can stop that. We’re still fighting oppression 200 years on.”

Anne has regularly attended the rallies held annually in Manchester to commemorate Peterloo. “As children we knew about Peterloo,” she said, “And we need to make the children of today aware of it as well.”



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