

SEP meeting in Alice Springs demands freedom for Assange and Manning

Our reporters
2 December 2019

An intensely engaged audience of teachers, community workers, immigrants and retirees unanimously passed a resolution demanding the immediate and unconditional release of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and US whistleblower Chelsea Manning at the Socialist Equality Party's public meeting in Alice Springs on November 24.

It was the first meeting in defence of Assange and Manning in the central Australian city, and the first-ever public event by the SEP in the vast but sparsely populated Northern Territory.

Alice Springs, which is thousands of kilometres from Sydney, Melbourne and other major Australian urban centres, is located about 26 kilometres north east of Pine Gap, America's most significant satellite tracking station. The massive and highly secret facility targets nuclear weapons and directs US drone operations in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is jointly run by the Central Intelligence Agency, US National Security Agency, and US National Reconnaissance Office.

The SEP public meeting was addressed by Richard Phillips and Zac Hambides, both members of the party's national committee, and Margaret Richardson, an Alice Springs resident, registered nurse and member of the Greens, who spoke in a personal capacity.

Meeting chair Phillips explained that the US-led state persecution and ongoing imprisonment of Assange and Manning was the sharpest expression of an escalating assault on press freedoms and basic democratic rights in every country. The meeting, he said, was also being held in the wake of the death of a young indigenous man in Yuendumu, who was shot and killed in his home by a police officer on November 9.

"This death is a direct result of the historic and ongoing oppression of Aboriginal people, and the stepped-up state persecution of the indigenous population in line with the increasing attacks on workers in every country. There's no Chinese wall between the persecution of Assange and the state harassment of Australia's indigenous population," Phillips said.

Introducing Margaret Richardson, Phillips explained that the public meeting in Alice Springs was being held because her tenacious determination to defend Assange led her to the Socialist Equality Party.

In early November Richardson wrote to Greens leader

Richard Di Natale denouncing the failure of the party's parliamentarians to conduct any serious fight against Assange's possible extradition to the US.

Richardson began by explaining her shock at seeing Assange forcibly removed from the Ecuadorian embassy. "The image of Julian Assange being dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy earlier this year in the most cruel and inhumane way, kept haunting me, and haunting and haunting me. I couldn't sleep," she said.

"I'm ashamed to say that I knew very little about him, apart from balcony scenes in London, from many years ago. I asked myself who is this man and I began to try and find out more about him. I watched YouTube video after video about him, and of him. I read voraciously about Assange. I was hungry for any information about him. Why was he being treated in such a heartless way?

"I watched the 'Collateral Murder' video. I heard soldiers whooping with joy at the killing of innocent people. I felt ill but forced myself to watch it again. Assange exposed the real horror of war in Iraq; this crime against humanity and what was really going on there.

"It didn't take me long to see what an extraordinary, courageous, highly-principled man Assange is. It was clear that he was innocent and that the sexual misconduct investigation was a frame-up and that Sweden was in bed with the USA. The Cablegate releases exposed more corruption from the US establishment, and for that too, he was being relentlessly pursued.

"I began to sob at the huge miscarriage of justice that had enveloped his life for almost a decade. I watched an interview with his father, John Shipton, and the gentleness and sweetness of John, and it once again made me weep. I continued my research and continued weeping.

"Unfolding before me was a clear miscarriage of justice that had followed Julian for nine years; the web of lies, the slander and persecution and the hatred that had pursued him. The intensity and the determination, to ruin his name and create a public opinion of him which was so far removed from the amazing man that he actually is, made me ask a lot of questions...

"Something inside me told me that I had to do everything I

possibly could to defend Assange. I could not rest until he was free. It was going to be one of those life-defining moments for me.

“I wanted to shout out to the public about the injustice to Assange. I had to find others who were doing something to defend him. I searched the net once again, and came across the Socialist Equality Party. They were having a rally very soon in Sydney in his defence. I didn’t hesitate; wild horses couldn’t have kept me away. I booked my ticket from Alice Springs immediately and attended the rally. I heard lots of great speeches, met some great people.

“I learnt more about the reasons behind Assange’s persecution and I found a support network of others who are really committed and are fighting wholeheartedly for the freedom of Assange, Chelsea Manning and freedom of speech. I found a network who fully understands the greater implication of Assange’s incarceration.

“Without Julian and WikiLeaks we will lose free speech, and without free speech we do not have democracy; we do not have a voice and are silenced. I felt inspired by the commitment of the SEP and was more prepared than ever to fight to free him and stop the extradition,” she said.

Inspired by the SEP rally, Richardson returned to Alice Springs, “more determined than ever and more armed to begin my fight to defend him.” She decided to write to the Greens, “the party I have been a member of for many, many years” urging them to launch a public defence campaign.

Richardson told the meeting she was shocked by the reaction to her letter. “So far I have only had minimal responses and which all claim that the Greens are doing something.” But the Greens campaign, she said “is invisible.”

“Assange is being persecuted as part of the preparation for war and the attacks on basic democratic rights and civil liberties.

“The USA and its allies cannot have an intelligent, fearless and truth-telling journalist exposing their plans for a war that will be like no other that we have ever known. My heartfelt decision to defend Julian Assange has meant that many pieces of the political jigsaw puzzle have fallen into place.”

Richardson concluded with a direct appeal: “When you decide to take up the fight to prevent Assange’s extradition to the USA you will learn many things. You will understand that the struggle for Assange’s freedom is connected to the defence of all our basic democratic rights. That is why I said in my interview with CAAMA [Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association] radio on Friday, ‘We are all Julian Assange.’

“Time is of the essence. Urgent action is required now to save Assange. We must bring our power together. We can win this. Free Julian Assange.”

Following Richardson’s passionate speech, SEP national committee member Zac Hambides used Powerpoint to present a detailed overview of the significance of major leaked documents published by WikiLeaks—the Iraq war logs, the

Afghan war logs, the Guantanamo Bay files and US diplomatic cables—and the ongoing violations of Assange’s legal rights.

He reviewed the political consequences for free speech, investigative journalism, and basic freedoms if Assange was extradited and prosecuted by the US.

“If Assange is extradited and prosecuted, it will mark a turning point in a protracted assault on democratic rights globally,” he said.

“The entire persecution of Julian Assange is a graphic lesson in the thoroughly rotten character of every capitalist institution, from the parliaments and the courts. This demonstrates that Assange will only be freed by a mass political movement of the working class... It is our task to build that movement,” he concluded and urged those present to join and build the SEP.

In discussion that followed the reports, Hambides explained that the political lessons drawn by Richardson from her encounters with the Greens and other parliamentary parties were being replicated by workers, students and young people around the world. These organisations have turned a blind-eye towards, or openly conspired in, the assault on basic democratic and social rights.

The eruption of mass struggles by US autoworkers and teachers, along with students and workers in Chile, Lebanon and other countries over the past 18 months, Hambides said, objectively demonstrated the possibility and necessity for the development of a globally unified movement of the working class against the capitalist profit system—the source of the attacks on Assange and Manning.

Several audience members, along with other Alice Springs residents unable to attend the meeting, spoke with WSWS reporters about the SEP’s campaign to secure the release of Assange and Manning (see: “Central Australian residents denounce persecution of Assange and Manning”).

The final SEP meeting in this series in Australia will be held in Melbourne on Sunday, December 15, at 2:30 p.m., at the Arts House, Meat Market 5 Blackwood Street, North Melbourne.



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