

Central Australian residents speak out in defence of Julian Assange

Our reporters
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Residents of the central Australian city of Alice Springs who took part in a recent Socialist Equality Party meeting and others unable to attend voiced their concerns over the persecution of WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange and the courageous US whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Walter Shaw is the chief executive officer of the Tangentyere Council which provides basic social services to the estimated 2,000 indigenous people who live in 18 town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs. He spoke with WSWs reporters two days after the public meeting, denouncing the incarceration of Assange by the British authorities and calling for his release.

"I've closely followed Julian Assange and WikiLeaks and remember seeing a film about him. It showed that he had a wealth of knowledge and a global perspective," Shaw said.

"Assange has exposed the secrecy of governments and the corporate world, but also the mass killings carried out by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, he's now the poor bugger that is being made to pay the price for revealing these crimes.

"What are they going to do to him? Are they going to keep him locked up and maintain their role as key turners of his life forever?

"What has happened to Assange is one of the most inhumane things I've seen. I feel for his father, who is advocating for his son, and as a father myself I'd do exactly the same thing if my son was in that position.

"Julian Assange should be given the best medical care available—he must be given back his quality of life—but instead of this he's being treated like a terrorist. This is deplorable and has to stop.

"Freedom of the press and free speech has to be protected. If we allow the US extradition of Assange it will show that Australia is bowing down to the superpower of America.

"I'm currently taking legal action against the Alice

Spring police over racial discrimination and have said, and repeated it after the recent police shooting of a young man in Yuendumu, that black lives matter, and that we're not in Ferguson, Missouri. But Julian Assange also has to be defended because, like everyone else, his life matters."

Tom Conway from Kintore, a remote settlement 530 kilometres west of Alice Springs, also voiced his concerns. Kintore, near the Western Australian border, has a population of about 450 people and is a major centre of the internationally renowned Western Desert Art movement. Conway is a member of the MacDonnell Regional Council, a local government area that covers 268,784 square kilometres.

"Julian Assange showed people all around the world what was going on—the corruption, war crimes and other funny business. He put all this on WikiLeaks so that everyone could read the documents and see the evidence for themselves.

"Assange is a journalist, he's done nothing wrong and we need to get him back to Australia. There should be marches, rallies, protests and that sort of thing everywhere. The American mob should not be able to take him back to the US."

Libby, a government sector worker who attended the meeting, said: "I support Assange because he exposed the truth internationally and was ready to face the consequences. In this case Assange has been held captive for truth telling.

"We should be ashamed of our politicians—Liberals, Labor, Democrats, you name it—not one of them has come forward to defend Julian Assange and, in fact, it is the other way round. They have shown us that they'll not give him any support.

"People become defiant when our government does nothing, so we have to come forward, we have to stand beside each other and speak up because otherwise we are being silenced, as much as Julian Assange," she said.

Sel, an Alice Springs teacher, said: “The meeting gave me more background information on Julian Assange and how disgusting it is that the US government can call for a non-US citizen—who didn’t commit any crimes against them—to be extradited to face life in prison, or possibly the death penalty.

“I’m ashamed to be an American and to be part of a country that is violating human rights. It’s supposed to be innocent until proven guilty in the US but I saw things like false imprisonment and people accused of something but no evidence provided and they’re still held in prison or given the death penalty.

“In Alice Springs there are lots of people on remand who were charged but never convicted and sit in prison for years. These injustices are happening here and it’s more common with people of colour.”

Emma, another Alice Springs school teacher, said the meeting was “really informative... It was both eye-opening and shocking to find out about how Assange has been treated and how Australian political parties are doing nothing to assist him.”

Biar, an aged care worker originally from South Sudan, drew a connection between the persecution of Assange and attacks on democratic rights in his native country.

“I came to the meeting because I wanted to find out about the situation facing Assange and hear about it from those who are defending him. At the meeting I learnt about socialism—that people need to be equal—and that’s why you guys are defending Assange, because you are concerned about the situation...

“There’s a gap [in my country] between people who are rich and the people who don’t have anything and aren’t being protected by the government. And for those of us from South Sudan, we say this isn’t the freedom that we fought for.

“If you speak out about anything that you say isn’t right, the current leadership of South Sudan see you as the enemy. But speaking out for yourself and others is a natural human right. That’s the connection between Julian Assange and the South Sudanese people.”

Michael, a retired worker, attended the meeting after seeing a poster. “I thought that Alice Springs would have been a tough nut to crack with regard to getting support for Assange, but you did well. Thanks for putting the meeting on. You need to have meetings everywhere—in Byron Bay, Mullumbimby—and other places,” he said.

“I’m not a very political person but this meeting gave us a lot of important information about the situation facing Assange and what we need to do.

“Assange is in bad physical and mental shape and urgently needs help. The government should be defending him but politicians won’t do anything unless they’re forced to. I’m still deciding what I can do but I’ll be talking to friends and putting out the feelers. The truth is the truth and we need to get it out there. People need to be awakened.”

Katalina, a local community worker and long-time Alice Springs resident who campaigned for the public meeting, said she was “totally committed” to the struggle to free the WikiLeaks founder.

“Assange is an intelligent and honest journalist who has not committed any crime but is facing horrific treatment in a British prison. I’m a student of political philosophy and feel a kindred spirit with him because he has shone a light on war crimes and other issues that should concern us all. We have to defend his health and his life.

“The public meeting was important and has helped to lay the basis for an Alice Springs support group. The overall issue is freedom of speech and journalistic freedom. We need people who are dedicated to this. We have to do everything possible to stop the spread of the fascist state, whose outlines are shown in the persecution and treatment of Assange.”

A day after the SEP meeting Katalina wrote to Amnesty International in Australia voicing her concerns about the organisation’s failure to defend Assange. Her letter, in part, said:

“I have appreciated and supported Amnesty International’s work and humane support for many people victimised and held prisoner by various regimes they have questioned or opposed. Unfortunately, there has been no mention or support for WikiLeaks journalist Julian Assange now being held in solitary confinement in Belmarsh prison in England. He is very ill and most likely, tortured and close to dying.

“Amnesty’s lack of any support for him is puzzling and disappointing, to say the least. How can you all stand by and not try to help an Australian citizen who is not a criminal? If you have ceased to be an unbiased humane organisation, I will withdraw my support from this organisation, along with others who are concerned about this significant omission of your support.”



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