

Meeting of Australian teachers passes resolutions in defence of Julian Assange

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A group of teachers and support staff at Footscray City College, a public high school in the Australian city of Melbourne, passed resolutions defending Julian Assange and calling for a campaign in his defence this week.

The meeting, attended by 16 teachers and staff, also resolved to form a committee to take forward the fight for Assange's freedom. It demanded that the Australian government fulfil its obligations to the WikiLeaks founder, as an Australian citizen and journalist, by blocking his threatened extradition to the US and securing his release from Britain's Belmarsh Prison.

The first resolution stated: "That this meeting of teachers opposes the ongoing persecution of journalist publisher and founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange and courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer warns specifically that 'Assange's continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life.'

"We insist that the federal Morrison government uses its diplomatic powers to organise the safe return of Assange to Australia. We resolve to send this resolution to other schools and workplaces."

The second resolution declared: "We undertake to form a committee dedicated to taking forward the defence of Julian Assange."

Both resolutions were overwhelmingly passed, after long-standing teacher Will Marshall gave a report to the meeting outlining Assange's dire plight and the sweeping implications of the US attempt to prosecute him on 17 espionage charges, carrying a maximum sentence of 175 years imprisonment, for exposing US war crimes.

Marshall is a prominent member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers'

organisation established to fight the attacks on education that have been imposed by successive Labor and Coalition governments. Marshall is also a member of the Socialist Equality Party, which spearheaded the formation of the CFPE.

In his remarks, Marshall detailed the draconian conditions of Assange's detention in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison, where he is being held in virtual solitary confinement and denied the ability to prepare a defence. He relayed the warnings of Melzer, and a group of more than 60 eminent doctors, who have said that Assange's health has deteriorated to the point that he may die in prison.

Marshall said the various smears that had been used to undermine support for Assange had been discredited, and it was now clear to millions that the myriad attacks against him have always been an attempt to suppress WikiLeaks' publishing activities.

The CFPE member outlined the Australian government's legal responsibility to intervene in Assange's defence and cited precedents for it to do so. He stated, however: "The trouble is the Australian government agrees with what is occurring. It has long-standing strategic ties to the United States that come in front of the life of a journalist." The Australian government was also employing the "Assange precedent," by cracking down on investigative journalism and heightening official secrecy provisions.

Marshall insisted that the fight to free Assange "will only be taken forward if there is a grassroots movement." He made a particular appeal to the educators present. He stressed: "As teachers, we all want the children we teach to be critical thinkers. But how can this happen when governments hide what they are doing? How can anyone make informed decisions when everything is hidden?"

The teachers have taken an important stand which points the way forward for other educators, and for all sections of the working class, in the fight for democratic rights and against the persecution of Assange. They have acted on the call, issued by Assange in a letter to a supporter in France, for workers to form “blocs” in their workplaces and unions to campaign for his freedom.

The passage of the motions is an expression of a broader groundswell of support for Assange, reflected in statements over the past weeks by prominent public figures, including politicians, journalists, doctors, and United Nations officials, demanding an end to the US-led vendetta.

The same week as the teachers’ meeting, the German Association of Journalists issued a statement opposing the attempt to extradite Assange. Their French counterparts issued an open letter to President Emmanuel Macron demanding this his government act against the attacks on Assange, last week.

In comments to the WSWs yesterday, Marshall said that there had been a discernible “shift” among teachers in support of Assange. This was closely connected to growing fears over a broader assault on democratic rights.

He recounted the experience of a colleague approaching him in shock after learning last month that an Australian citizen—reportedly a former military and intelligence officer—was prosecuted, convicted and imprisoned in Canberra last year in a trial held in complete secrecy. The teacher compared this to the repressive actions of the Nazis and the US Central Intelligence Agency. Teachers were also increasingly reading the coverage of the Assange case on the *World Socialist Web Site*, Marshall said.

Marshall noted that the motion in defence of Assange, the first to be passed by teachers in Australia, came from rank-and-file teachers, not the education trade unions.

The unions had remained silent on the plight of the WikiLeaks editor, in line with their refusal to defend any democratic rights and their decades-long collaboration with governments in the gutting of education and the destruction of social rights. This underscored, he said, the fact that a movement to free Assange must come from below.

As part of its international campaign in defence of

Assange, the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world are calling on workers and all defenders of democratic rights to take active steps to build on the groundswell of support that has developed for the WikiLeaks founder:

? Hold meetings in your workplace, college, university or school to discuss the imminent threat to Assange’s life and the dangers this poses to the democratic rights of the entire working class.

? Pass resolutions demanding the blocking of his extradition to the US and his immediate and unconditional freedom.

? Organise delegations for global demonstrations that have been called in February.



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