

Sri Lanka: SEP meeting in Colombo demands release of Assange and Manning

Our correspondents
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Around 75 workers and young people attended a January 2 public meeting at the Public Library Auditorium in central Colombo in defence of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The event, which was convened by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), unanimously passed a resolution calling for the immediate and unconditional release of WikiLeaks publisher Assange and US whistleblower Manning.

SEP members and supporters campaigned for the meeting in railway, irrigation, and harbour workers' neighbourhoods and other working-class areas in Colombo, as well as among university students. The Sri Lankan media and the parliamentary parties have largely blacked out information about the ongoing repression of Assange and Manning. The SEP and IYSSE are the only organisations in Sri Lanka that have held public meetings and rallies in defence of the two.

The meeting was chaired by SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena who reviewed the campaign being conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* for the release of Assange and Manning.

Wijesiriwardena stressed the urgency of this international campaign, explaining that Assange, who is currently being held in solitary confinement at Belmarsh maximum security prison in London, will face an extradition trial in the UK in late February. If he is extradited to the US, he will be tried on 18 bogus charges, including for espionage, and could be imprisoned for 175 years or face capital punishment.

Chelsea Manning is incarcerated at the prison in Alexandria, Virginia and is being punished for refusing to give perjured testimony against Assange. Wijesiriwardena quoted Manning's powerful refusal to cooperate with prosecutors earlier this year, in which she declared: "I can either go to jail or betray my principles. The latter exists as a much worse prison than the government can construct."

Wijesiriwardena outlined the response of the pseudo-left parties and figures such as Bernie Sanders from the US Democratic Party and British Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to the witch hunt against Assange and Manning. Their refusal to defend these courageous individuals is mirrored in Sri Lanka by the silence of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist

Party, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party, he said.

IYSSE convenor Kapila Fernando told the meeting that the attack on Assange and Manning is being carried out by the most powerful imperialist powers in the world. "Their goal," he said, "is both to prevent the masses from learning about their crimes and block workers from opposing the wars that the imperialist powers are now preparing... That is why we say that the exposure of war crimes [by Assange and Manning] is a great service for mankind."

The speaker documented the situation now confronting the working class—the closures of factories and plants, the destruction of thousands of jobs and mounting global debt—and the growing determination of workers to fight.

Autoworkers in America and Mexico, teachers, rail workers and other workers all over the world, he continued, are engaged in struggle. Although the trade unions have worked to undermine workers' actions, the ruling classes are frightened. At the same time, governments in this region, including in India and Sri Lanka, have lined up with Washington's war drive against China. The fight to free Assange and Manning is a vital part of the emerging struggles of workers for their social and democratic rights, and against imperialist militarism, Fernando said.

K. Ratnayake, the WSWs national editor in Sri Lanka, was the final speaker. "The struggle for the release of Assange and Manning is bound up with the international movement of workers in the third decade of the 21st century—against a third world war, the attack on social rights and the danger of fascist dictatorships and authoritarian rule," he said.

The ICFI, its sections and the WSWs opposed the witch hunt of Assange and Manning from the outset and initiated a continuous fight for their defence. Assange, Manning and National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden are heroes of the working class, Ratnayake said.

"According to the US and its imperialist allies, the greatest crime of Assange and Manning is their exposure of the truth about the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere," the speaker said. The war logs on Afghanistan and Iraq, which revealed hundreds of US war crimes, such as video footage of a US helicopter attack in Baghdad that killed over 15 people,

including two Reuters journalists, were leaked by Manning and published by WikiLeaks.

The jailing of Assange and Manning, Ratnayake said, is part of the preparations for new imperialist wars. “While the White House and the Pentagon want to subjugate Russia and China, they will not stop there and are already engaged in trade wars with the European powers,” Ratnayake told the meeting. “As Lenin explained in the last century, we are in the era of imperialism, that of wars and revolutions. Mankind is now in an advanced stage of that era.”

The major working class struggles that emerged in 2018 and 2019 are expanding and now posing revolutionary questions. The response of the ruling classes is war, social counterrevolution, fascism and dictatorship, the speaker said. He elaborated on how these developments are being expressed in Sri Lanka.

The recently-elected President Gotabaya Rajapakse, who is widely despised, Ratnayake said, came to power by using the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks to stoke anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism.

The new president is now appealing to Sinhala-Buddhist fascist outfits and the military with the aim of erecting a dictatorship, Ratnayake warned. The Rajapakse government has attacked scores of journalists and political opponents and is surely backing the anti-democratic attacks on Assange.

The speaker explained that the fight to free Julian Assange, in line with the rising militancy of the international working class, is winning new support.

The Open Letter issued by the WSWs International Editorial Board on June 20, 2019 calling for an internationally unified fight to defend Assange is gaining ground, he said. Ratnayake cited significant recent initiatives, including open letters signed by eminent doctors demanding that Assange receive urgent medical care, a statement by more than 1,000 journalists defending the WikiLeaks founder and the decision late last month by the Sri Lankan Journalists for Global Justice to issue a statement calling for his immediate freedom.

Ratnayake concluded by calling for an intensification of meetings and other defence actions in the weeks leading up to the Assange extradition trial in London in late February. He urged all those in attendance to join the SEP and IYSSE and build the revolutionary leadership of the working class required to take forward the fight for democratic rights and for socialism.

The audience responded enthusiastically, passing the resolution that was presented.

After the meeting, **Mahinda Haththaka**, the chairman of Sri Lankan Journalists for Global Justice, stated: “I highly appreciate the campaign carried out by the ICFI and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, through the WSWs, to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning who have been subjected to a brutal witch-hunt by the imperialists, led by the US. I would like to express my full support for that campaign.

“I am a WSWs reader and have read almost all WSWs articles about the campaign to free Assange and Manning.

“The exposure made by Assange and Manning of the crimes of the imperialists is very important for the progressive masses throughout the world. I fully agree with the characterisation made by the WSWs that the assault on them is the highest point of the entire attack carried out by capitalists ruling classes throughout the world against the working class and oppressed masses.

“All those who cherish democratic rights must actively join the struggle to free Assange and Manning. I have attended this meeting in that spirit.

“Under conditions of the support extended by all other political parties in Sri Lanka for this witch-hunt through their complicit silence, the struggle waged only by the SEP is very principled and I highly appreciate it. I am ready to do whatever possible to bring forward this campaign with the SEP in the coming period.”

Musahith, a physical science student at the University of Colombo, said: “I was shocked when I heard about the present situation of Julian Assange. People should not fear to raise their voices in his defence. Workers should take it up as one of the main slogans in their protests.

“I oppose any violation of democratic rights in any corner of the world. That’s the reason why I was first attracted to an earlier SEP meeting opposing the siege in Kashmir by India’s BJP government.

“And it’s not just in Kashmir. The entire attack unleashed by the BJP government through its anti-democratic citizenship bill is unprecedented. However, the courage shown in numerous protests across India against those measures is significant. The Indian government, like its counterparts, fears the opposition and unity of workers and youth across ethnic lines.

“In Sri Lanka, the situation is not different. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is strengthening police state measures in preparation for the forthcoming struggles. I agree with the point made in this meeting that the fight for the freedom of Assange is so crucial for the defence of democratic rights internationally.”



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