Support grows for New Zealand rallies to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning

Tom Peters
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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) has found growing support in New Zealand for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning, despite a media blackout on any news about these courageous individuals. They have been persecuted for the past decade for exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and government corruption and gangsterism throughout the world. Assange is in prison in the UK awaiting trial for extradition to the US, while Manning has been re-imprisoned in the US in an attempt to force her to testify against Assange.

The SEG is holding a rally in Cuba Street, Wellington on Sunday, February 23 at 3:00 p.m. as part of international demonstrations to demand freedom for Assange and Manning. The group Free Assange NZ is holding further rallies on February 24 at midday outside parliament in Wellington, and in Auckland outside the UK consulate. The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) has called several rallies (details below).

Sunday's event will be addressed by SEG members Tom Peters and John Braddock, as well as Free Assange NZ's Alex Hills. Last year, Hills memorably denounced the UK government and media hypocrisy at a World Press Freedom Day event in Wellington.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Hills said many people know little about WikiLeaks, but "when you start to talk to them, the encouraging thing is that the truth does convince, and soon enough you've got someone on your side."

In 2018, her group started an international movement called Candles4Assange with a vigil on Assange's birthday. For Assange's 48th birthday last year, there were events in 62 cities in 25 countries. Free Assange NZ also gathered more than 2,000 signatures for a petition urging the Labour Party-Greens-NZ First government "to provide Julian Assange with permanent political asylum in New Zealand." Parliament refused to even discuss the petition.

Hills told the WSWS, "I have volunteered for the Greens in my past. I wouldn't do that again after their atrocious reaction to the asylum petition." She added that "MPs are becoming increasingly disconnected from the people" and successive governments had integrated New Zealand more closely into the US war machine.

Hills had personally approached Green MP Jan Logie, Labour MP Paul Eagle and opposition National Party MP Nicola Young, all of whom refused to support Assange. Logie echoed the "Russiagate" smear—lies peddled by the US intelligence agencies that WikiLeaks worked with Russia in 2016 to obtain leaks exposing former US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's ties to Wall Street banks and the Democratic Party's sabotage of Bernie Sanders' campaign for the nomination.

Hills had also contacted the protest group Peace Action Wellington, which includes anarchists, but "they didn't seem to want to know" about the campaign to free Assange.

The media's hostility to Assange was linked to its embrace of US warmongering, Hills said. She noted that when the 2003 invasion of Iraq was revealed to have been based on lies about "weapons of mass destruction," this was "front page news." Today, however, there is silence about WikiLeaks' publication of emails from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) casting serious doubt on allegations that the Assad regime carried out gas attacks in Syria—claims used to justify US military intervention.

Urging people to join the upcoming protests, Hills said: "The precedent that's being set is that war

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criminals can continue in the parliaments and elsewhere, that we're in a situation where money rules and corporates rule. That can't be the future, we can't hand that to our children."

The WSWS also spoke with **Charlene**, part of Free Assange NZ in Auckland. She described the "Collateral Murder" video released by WikiLeaks as "the biggest visual horror" from the war in Iraq. It shows innocent people, including journalists, being massacred from a US helicopter gunship. "There needs to be someone held accountable, because if we don't have that then the people lose their power," she said.

"I worry for my children about what the future will hold if they get Julian over to the US. First and foremost, that we'll never see Julian again, and that's horrendous, and that we would lose such a fabulous mind, such a humanitarian. But then the flow-on effect is that journalism, as we know it, would be shut down. The future looks very bleak if those who have a passion for telling the truth are unable to do so and they're punished for it."

Speaking about the media's demonisation of Assange, Charlene said: "I've stood on the corner by TVNZ's building and I told a woman off who walked past and called him a rapist. I won't stand for it. They're lying, or they don't know anything. We have to be strong and we have to be unwavering in standing up for him." The Swedish rape allegations against Assange, the basis for a years-long smear campaign, have been completely discredited.

David, a Wellington barista, told the WSWS he was supporting the protest because "I think Assange and Manning and Edward Snowden are very brave, and the fact that the Socialist Equality Group is putting such a focus on this is brilliant."

He denounced the media for failing to discuss "the crimes that have been committed" by the US in the Middle East. Instead, "they're talking about somebody revealing those crimes, and then smattering him with the image of being treasonous. It's so backward, and it's contrary to the founding principles on which America was based: transparency, accountability, speaking out against injustices. The people have the right to know how their leaders are acting and behaving."

"The media are owned by large corporations in alignment with those in power and their ideology is harmonious," David said. "They don't want to disrupt the system that keeps them so well-financed."

Bernie, a transport worker in Wellington, said he fears for Assange's safety and "that they might degrade him so much mentally, to make him crumble, to break a person down and disintegrate their life all for the sake of power and control."

Bernie compared the treatment of Assange with the Saudi Arabian regime's murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The brutal killing "was very downplayed [by the Trump administration]. Its reaction was quite shockingly insipid, like it didn't really matter what happened because he said things that the Saudi government didn't like."

Speaking of Washington's "endless warmongering," he said: "There's a broader assault on human rights and also trying to normalise violence in a way that will make us desensitised to anything that happens in the future." People should join the protests "because they don't want to live in a world that tortures people for their political views," he said.

Rally details:

Free Assange! Free Manning! No to extradition!

Wellington, New Zealand Rally

Sunday, February 23, 3:00 p.m.
Cuba Street (intersection with Left Bank)
Wellington

Sydney Rally

Saturday February 22, 12:00 p.m.
Parramatta Town Hall
182 Church Street, Parramatta

Melbourne Rally and March

Sunday February 23, 2:00 p.m.
State Library of Victoria
Then march to Federation Square

Brisbane Rally

Saturday February 29, 2:00 p.m.
Reddacliff Place, Brisbane
(corner Queen and George Street)

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