Rally and march in Melbourne, Australia demands freedom for Julian Assange

Patrick O'Connor
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About 140 people joined the Socialist Equality Party's rally to defend Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning at the State Library in central Melbourne yesterday, before marching to nearby Federation Square.

Those participating included SEP members and supporters, contingents from the SEP's youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), from the University of Melbourne and Victoria University, supporters of the Australians for Assange and Melbourne4WikiLeaks campaign groups. They were joined by other workers, retirees and young people outraged by the international persecution of Assange, the WikiLeaks founder.

Some attended the rally after travelling several hundred kilometres from regional Victorian centres, such as Euroa. The event was part of a series of rallies organised by the SEP in Australia and Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, and events organised by our movement and others internationally. The fight to free Assange has been stepped up around the world ahead of the hearing in London that threatens him with extradition to the US on trumped-up espionage charges and imprisonment for life.

SEP National Committee member, Sue Phillips, chaired the rally. She explained from the outset: "The cruel and tortuous treatment of both Assange and Manning expresses the ruthless attitude of the ruling elite in every country against the democratic rights of the entire working class as governments move toward authoritarian forms of rule and dictatorship. Assange and Manning are political prisoners, class-war prisoners of the 21st century and must be defended."

Evrim Yazgin, the IYSSE president at the University of Melbourne, then connected the oppression of Assange and parallel growth in internet censorship with the fear in ruling circles of the explosive development of social movements internationally against social inequality, climate change, and austerity attacks on wages and conditions. "This growing movement of the working class is also a movement of the younger generation. It is, therefore, a movement that will shape the future," he explained.

"Those under 30 now comprise over half the world's population and over 65 percent of the population in the world's fastest growing regions—Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. Each month in India, one million people turn 18. In the Middle East and North Africa, an estimated 27 million young people will enter the workforce in the next five years. More and more young people are getting their daily news outside the mainstream media—which they increasingly recognise represents the interests of the tiny, wealthy minority. Social media and alternative news platforms are being utilised to spread information and organise protests and meetings."

Will Marshall, a member of the SEP and the Committee for Public Education, called on workers everywhere to move resolutions and form committees at their workplaces defending the WikiLeaks founder. "At the school where I work, previously called Footscray City College and now Footscray High School, on three occasions teachers and education support staff have voted to support Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning—in June 2018, in February 2019 and last December."

Marshall said teachers were acting on the advice of Assange himself, to take his defence into workplaces. "Assange said in a letter to a supporter: 'You ask what you can do to fight for my freedom? Use your strategic skills, friends, resources and associations. If you are a nurse, gather nurses, form a bloc in the nurses'

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union.’”

Marshall emphasised: “Teachers and education workers acted against the deafening silence of the unions, including the Australian Education Union, which has been more than happy to leave Assange and Manning hung out to dry.”

In her speech, online writer and longstanding WikiLeaks supporter Caitlin Johnstone referred to the important role played by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, in publicly defending Assange, after initially being misled by the propaganda against Assange.

“The power behind his [Melzer’s] testimony comes from the fact that he realised that he had been duped—and if he, a very intelligent, well read, worldly, informed and educated person could be duped, then anyone can be,” Johnstone explained.

“No one is immune. Human minds are hackable. We’re all very busy with our lives. We’re all kept busy by capitalism, and very few of us have the time to do what he did and sit down and take a look at the facts and assess them.”

Johnstone urged those present to talk to their family and friends and encourage them to look at the facts and change their minds. “Reassure them that it’s not going to be the end of the world if they change their mind. In fact, it may be the end of the world if they don’t.”

The full text of Johnstone’s speech is published here.

SEP National Committee member James Cogan, who has played a leading role in the fight to defend Assange and Manning, read greetings sent to the rally from Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the SEP in the United States and its 2020 presidential candidate. Kishore demanded the immediate freedom of Assange and Manning and described the extradition hearings in London as “a legal travesty and abomination.”

Cogan concluded the rally by outlining an independent perspective through which the working class can defend Assange. “At this rally, we are certainly demanding that the Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison act immediately to compel the Johnson Tory government in Britain to reject the extradition, release Julian Assange and allow him to return to Australia without any conditions, if he chooses to do so, with guaranteed protection from any US extradition application,” he explained.

“We are demanding that the Trump administration end its vindictive imprisonment of Chelsea Manning, restore her freedom and drop the outrageous fines that have been levelled against her. But we have no illusions that Morrison, Johnson or Trump, or the political establishment in any country, are going to listen to moral appeals over the injustice of the situation or undergo some type of overnight transformation into defenders of democratic rights.”

After the addresses at the State Library, rally participants marched down central Swanston Street. Chants included: “Free Assange, free Manning! No US extradition!” and “Assange and Manning must have freedom—No fake trial and no rendition!” Many people in the city centre expressed support for the march as it passed, taking leaflets and donating money, while some joined the rally. The march concluded with further remarks from James Cogan, who emphasised that the fight to free Assange would be a protracted one and that further actions would follow.

The SEP (Australia) and members of the Julian Assange Brisbane Facebook Group will be a holding a rally in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, this Saturday to demand the immediate and unconditional release of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Rally Details:

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

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