

Australia: “Teachers for Assange and Manning” campaign in Melbourne

Sue Phillips
7 March 2020

Teachers and members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) campaigned in Melbourne last weekend to win support for the freedom of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The campaign was organised in the aftermath of the opening week of Assange’s US extradition hearing in London, which was exposed as a political show trial aimed at condemning the WikiLeaks founder to life imprisonment for exposing US war crimes.

“Teachers for Assange and Manning” was initiated by the CFPE as a result of a series of resolutions passed at Footscray City Secondary College moved by Will Marshall, a longstanding Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and CFPE member. The resolutions opposed the ongoing persecution of Assange and demanded the Morrison government do everything in its powers to secure the safe freedom of Assange. The resolution also called for a broadening of the campaign to other schools and workplaces.

Following the political lead given by Footscray educators, a meeting of the Hills Association of the New South Wales Teachers Federation in northwest Sydney unanimously passed a similar resolution moved by Erika Laslett, a secondary teacher and SEP member.

Last week, the same resolution was again passed unanimously by more than 30 teachers at a meeting of the Illawarra Teachers Association in Wollongong.

The resolution read: “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 use its diplomatic powers to organise the safe return of Assange to Australia. We resolve to send this resolution to other schools and workplaces.”

In moving the resolution, Pietro Mascetti, a secondary teacher, said he felt compelled to raise the resolution because “a great travesty of justice is being committed which has extremely serious consequences for teachers, for our children and for the world. We are in the business of educating, of informing our students and developing critical thinking attitudes, all of which are being attacked in the persecution of Julian Assange.”

The active intervention of teachers and education support staff at workplaces and schools is just one indication of the growing concern among millions of people that a terrible injustice is being carried out and that Assange’s persecution has immense implications.

This was evident on the Melbourne campaign, as workers and students stopped to talk to the campaign team, took leaflets, made comments, donated and signed up for more information.

Alan said: “I’ve followed Assange for a long time. I have researched this and the Five Eyes [surveillance] network which was set up to counter the Soviet Union. Now it’s being used for economic espionage on an industrial scale. The US wants to use it and Australia is a minor partner. Assange has exposed things like that. But his prosecution opens up the floodgates to other journalists. He didn’t break any laws. He’s not a US citizen. This is draconian.”

Yvon, a retired worker, said: “We need to save him. If Julian Assange goes, then freedom of speech is gone. He has committed no crime. He has published the truth.” **Liz** a disability worker added: “Because of Assange, any journalist today is going to be vulnerable.”

The fight for Assange and Manning has coincided with an upsurge of workers struggles internationally. Teachers have been at the forefront of this growing movement, battling the assault on public education and fighting for decent working conditions.

Last month 200,000 teachers in Ontario went on strike

to oppose the austerity program of the provincial government. This was followed by a national strike by 200,000 teachers in Sri Lanka. This week, teachers in the US walked out in Salt Lake City while graduate students at the University of California continued wildcat strikes. Some 50,000 academics in Britain took industrial action and maintained picket lines against casualisation and increasing workloads.

Several teachers stopped to discuss freedom for Assange, the suppression of democratic rights and the assault on public education.

Jude, a retired art teacher said: “I don’t know all the ins-and-outs of what has happened to Julian Assange, but I do know he is in jail in the UK and faces extradition to the US. I know his health is not good and I am very concerned about both his physical and mental health.

“The Australian government should be doing something about his situation. This is all about freedom of speech and censorship. Assange is doing an important job by exposing war crimes. If people like him don’t stand up or can’t stand up, then we are living in a fascist state.”

Jude was aware of the teacher strikes in the US over the last two years and commented on the retrogressive changes being imposed in public education. She commented: “I have a friend who is a middle school teacher in Texas. He is an art teacher and has 50 students in class. He is a fantastic teacher and gives the students great art projects, but this is impossible.”

Mandy, who is a primary teacher and CFPE member, explained why she had joined the campaign: “The more I learn about the situation with Assange, the more outraged I become and the more I feel the need to tell other people. Others have to understand and become outraged too, and together we need to do something. The government won’t do anything, but we need to. Assange’s freedom can only come from what ordinary people do.

“Teachers rights are being suppressed. We don’t have a voice in what happens in education. Assange’s situation is a very extreme example of that same process. There is a link between democratic rights and suppression of freedom of speech and that is what attracts teachers. If we stand by and let this happen to Assange it will get worse for everyone.”

Kate a secondary teacher and CFPE campaigner, said: “There is a lot of support out there for Julian Assange. Many people want to find a way forward. There is real concern about what his prosecution means for democratic rights. People are concerned that the truth is being concealed. They don’t like it that governments are hiding

what is going on. One man said to me on the campaign that Assange is the last bastion of democratic rights. That really stood out in my mind.”

Phoebe, who works in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector and took part in the campaign, said: “I joined the team because if Assange is extradited to the US and sentenced for publishing the truth, it will create a precedent for anyone to be persecuted by the ruling elite for going against their narrative and their secrecy. This is a grave miscarriage of justice.

“I found a lot of people to be very open towards the campaign. You could see that they had respect for teachers being at the forefront of this campaign. Teachers taking a stand is important as it is also against the ruling elite, who feel threatened by the power of public education and intellectualism.”

In contrast to the positive and enthusiastic response of teachers and other workers to the campaign for freedom of Assange, the trade union apparatuses, including the teacher unions, are maintaining a complicit silence—as is the official media and the official political parties.

To secure the freedom of Assange and Manning, educators, workers and young people need to act independently of the official organisations. Pass resolutions at your school, establish a defence committee, and send delegations to other workplaces. Teachers and education support staff who wish to take forward this critical fight contact the CFPE.

For further information:

Email: Cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact