

New Zealand protest demands freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporter
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On Monday, January 4, several hours before the unexpected verdict in Britain that Julian Assange should not be extradited to the United States, his supporters gathered in New Zealand to show their solidarity with the WikiLeaks founder.

Although Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled that Assange should not be extradited because of the grave risk to his mental health, the journalist and publisher remains in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison, in appalling conditions that amount to arbitrary detention and torture. The prison has also been hit by a potentially deadly outbreak of coronavirus.

The US government will appeal against the verdict, further dragging out the judicial travesty. The Democrats and Republicans have relentlessly persecuted Assange, accusing him of “espionage” for publishing documents in 2010 supplied by whistleblower Chelsea Manning, that exposed the brutal reality of the criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Free Assange NZ organised a rally on the waterfront in Wellington. The group’s spokesperson, Alex Hills, pointed to the growing support for Assange, both internationally and in New Zealand. The network #Candles4Assange promoted 30 protests over the weekend in 12 different countries, including Canada, Britain, the US, Australia, Brazil and Germany.

Hills told the Wellington gathering: “If you want to protect your children’s free press, if you want them to be able to hold their governments to account in the future, you have to support this.” She denounced New Zealand’s Labour Party-Greens coalition government led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for its refusal to say or do anything in defence of Assange’s basic human rights.

New Zealand is a US ally and successive

governments sent troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Leading Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) member Tom Peters also addressed the protest, saying: “Julian Assange is a political prisoner and he is a class war prisoner... The Assange case is a litmus test for any organisation and any person claiming to support freedom of the press, democratic rights and opposition to war.”

Peters denounced the psychological and physical torture Assange has endured. He quoted statements from Assange’s partner and the mother of his children, Stella Moris, highlighting the blatantly political and unlawful character of Assange’s extradition trial, including the fact that he and his lawyers were spied on by the CIA.

The SEG speaker warned: “It is worse than useless to put our faith in Joe Biden, or Donald Trump, or any of the US-allied governments around the world, including New Zealand. They all hate WikiLeaks, they all defend war criminals, they all serve the interests of big business.”

He continued: “The working class, the vast majority of the world’s population, must be mobilised. What is at stake in this case is freedom of speech itself and the right of ordinary people to know the truth about wars, about crimes against humanity, about the domination of politics by big business.

“World War I and World War II were accompanied by mass censorship of information, including the persecution of those who exposed the predatory aims and crimes of all the governments involved. The same process is happening again as the United States is ramping up its threats against Iran and China. The exposures by WikiLeaks are an essential contribution to the fight for an equal society, and for a world without war and without exploitation.”

The WSWs spoke with some of those attending the event.

Chelsea said that learning about the persecution of Assange was “the saddest thing that I’ve ever experienced. I’m so proud of what he’s done but the world’s too silent about what’s happening with him.”

She praised WikiLeaks’ revelations, saying the most important was the “Collateral Murder” video, leaked by whistleblower Chelsea Manning, showing the murder of civilians and journalists in Iraq by US forces. “The way that people can just shoot down people and laugh about it, saddens me greatly. Journalists are being shut down, they’re disappearing. It’s scary, so people aren’t going to keep doing it because they are afraid of losing their lives.”

Chelsea hoped Assange would not be extradited. “That would be the most fearful thing for me and everybody else backing him. He’s got a family, he’s got kids and a partner. People need to stand up for him.” She said most people she had spoken to about the case thought WikiLeaks had done amazing work, but “the media blacks everything out, no one knows enough.”

Anna, who is from Britain, said Assange was “a freedom fighter” who had exposed “America’s war crimes. They’re trying to cover it up, they’re trying to crush him, and it cannot be allowed. I’m from England, which I’m not very proud about, to be honest. I think their legal system is a joke, they’re just as corrupt as America. I hope enough pressure is on the UK that they’ll make the right decision.”

Anna explained that the indictment against Assange under the US Espionage Act had no legal basis, given that Assange was not a US citizen. “I don’t know why it’s even being entertained.” She mentioned that there were “very valid reasons why Emma Arbuthnot shouldn’t have been the judge, which have been ignored. It just shows the corruption again.” Arbuthnot’s husband is a Conservative member of the House of Lords with ties to the British armed forces exposed by WikiLeaks.

Anna denounced the “outrageous” conduct of the trial and mistreatment of Assange. “I’m sure it’s not just Assange, he’s not the only prisoner who suffers. But I think there’s a definite operation in place to psychologically destroy him. The whole court case proceedings were ridiculous, the way Amnesty

International was kept out of it, the way he was kept in that little glass box, the way the technology kept going faulty. The whole thing’s been a farce.”



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