

The Sydney rally to defend Julian Assange: An important step forward

18 June 2018

Yesterday, Sunday June 17, a demonstration was held in Sydney's Town Hall Square to fight for the immediate and unconditional freedom of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange. The rally demanded that the Australian government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull secure the release of Assange from his confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy in London and his safe return to Australia.

The rally was introduced and chaired by longstanding Socialist Equality Party (SEP) leader Linda Tenenbaum. It was addressed by SEP national secretary James Cogan; Evrim Yazgin, the president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Melbourne; and Sue Phillips, the national convener of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE). It was concluded with a powerful speech by well-known journalist and documentarist John Pilger, who has been a tireless fighter for the freedom of Julian Assange and the media.

The rally was based on the political principle that the defense of Assange is inseparably linked to the fight against the oppressive capitalist system, which is the cause of war, social inequality, and all attacks on democratic rights.

An audience of several hundred people, including many students and workers, attended and vigorously applauded the speakers. They attended despite a total establishment media blackout, and the hostility of the entire official political set-up towards the defence of Assange.

Opening the rally, Tenenbaum declared, "The Socialist Equality Party has organised this rally to begin the fight to build a powerful defence campaign in Australia, New Zealand and internationally that will bring together all those committed to democratic rights—the right of journalists to inform the population,

their right to freedom of speech, and the right of everyone to be informed of the truth. These are issues of the most fundamental character. The suppression of the truth, of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, goes hand in hand with the destruction of democratic rights."

In his address, James Cogan declared that the rally was "crucial for the working class, because it is part of the greater struggle for all the social and democratic rights of the vast mass of humanity."

Cogan explained that increasing awareness of and concerns about the danger of war were developing within the working class and youth, "in these times when the American president speaks casually of 'totally destroying' entire countries with nuclear weapons.

"Of perhaps the most decisive importance," Cogan continued, "the working class and the youth are coming back into struggle in the United States—the epicenter of world reaction and capitalist degradation.

"One cannot understand the determination of the American ruling elite to silence WikiLeaks and Assange without an understanding of their fear of the working class. The capitalist ruling classes and their representatives in the US and internationally are terrified of the power that the Internet provides to the working class, to ordinary people.

"It gives them access to alternative analysis and news; the ability to exchange information and opinions; and to politically organise across national borders: to unite together as an international force."

The speaker observed, "Over the past three weeks, as we have promoted this rally, and the vigils that are taking place on June 19, we have revealed the extent of the support for Assange and WikiLeaks that exists in the working class in Australia and internationally."

"The establishment has abandoned him. Millions of people have not. What governments and political

parties do now, at a time when Assange faces immense danger, is not going to be forgotten.”

The speech delivered by John Pilger provided a fierce and penetrating exposure of all those politicians, newspaper editors, journalists, ex-liberals and “ex-lefts” who had abandoned Julian Assange to the wolves. It constituted a powerful defence of democratic rights.

“I know Julian Assange well,” he began. “I regard him as a close friend, a person of extraordinary resilience and courage. I have watched a tsunami of lies and smear engulf him, endlessly, vindictively, perfidiously; and I know why they smear him.

“In 2008, a plan to destroy both WikiLeaks and Assange was laid out in a top secret document dated 8 March, 2008. The authors were the Cyber Counter-intelligence Assessments Branch of the US Defence Department. They described in detail how important it was to destroy the ‘feeling of trust’ that is WikiLeaks’ ‘centre of gravity.’

“This would be achieved, they wrote, with threats of ‘exposure [and] criminal prosecution,’ and an unrelenting assault on reputation. The aim was to silence and criminalise WikiLeaks and its editor and publisher. It was as if they planned a war on a single human being and on the very principle of freedom of speech.

“Their main weapon would be personal smear. Their shock troops would be enlisted in the media—those who are meant to keep the record straight and tell us the truth. The irony is that no one told these journalists what to do. I call them Vichy journalists—after the Vichy government that served and enabled the German occupation of wartime France.”

Pilger’s invocation of “Vichy” was a well-chosen metaphor, and one that is particularly apt today.

The Vichy regime, in France during World War II, was made up of Nazi collaborators. They have their counterparts in today’s pseudo-left, who, along with the trade unions, the Labor Party, the Greens and “Independents” all consciously boycotted the rally, the first organised for many years in any country to defend Julian Assange.

Nothing could more clearly expose the relationship between the “identity politics” of this cowardly milieu and the interests of imperialism. They utilised the filthy “rapist” slander campaign, concocted against Assange

in Sweden, to line up with their own governments and disown any defence of the courageous whistleblower.

Against this affluent, self-interested and anti-working class layer, Pilger insisted, “No investigative journalism in my lifetime can equal the importance of what WikiLeaks has done in calling rapacious power to account. It is as if a one-way moral screen has been pushed back to expose the imperialism of liberal democracies: the commitment to endless warfare and the division and degradation of “unworthy” lives: from Grenfell Tower to Gaza.”

The rally was not a one-off event. The International Committee of the Fourth International will continue to develop and extend the fight for Julian Assange’s freedom throughout the world, and to mobilise the vast social power of the international working class in defence of social and democratic rights. Sunday’s rally underscored the fact that such a struggle can only be waged on the basis of an anti-imperialist, anti-war and socialist perspective.

Linda Tenenbaum

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