

Melbourne rally calls on workers and youth to defend Assange and Manning

By our reporters
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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) rally in Melbourne yesterday issued a strong demand for the freedom of Julian Assange and the immediate release of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who was detained by the Trump administration last Friday in a bid to coerce her into testifying against the WikiLeaks founder.

It followed a successful SEP rally in Sydney on March 3, addressed by world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger, SEP National Secretary James Cogan and other leading defenders of democratic rights.

Acclaimed singer-songwriter Roger Waters issued a video on Saturday calling for maximum participation in the Melbourne protest and in a vigil held by the Julian Assange Defence Committee outside Ecuador's London embassy. It has been viewed almost 200,000 times.

The Melbourne rally was attended by around 300 workers, students, young people, professionals and retirees. Among the participants were individuals who knew Assange and his mother Christine when they lived in Melbourne years ago. Prominent WikiLeaks supporters were present, including the well-known independent journalist Caitlin Johnstone.

Contingents took part from the University of Melbourne and Victoria University, where the SEP's youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), conducted a widespread campaign for the rally. Students from other universities, colleges and from high schools also participated.

Some of the demonstrators travelled a considerable distance to take a stand in defence of Assange and Manning. Individuals from the country towns of Ballarat and Echuca, which are several hours drive from Melbourne, were present. At least one protester travelled from Sydney.

An international audience participated in the event through a Facebook Livestream, which has currently been viewed over 6,000 times. Hundreds of others registered their support on Twitter and other social media.

Chairing the demonstration, long-standing SEP member Will Marshall commended the participants, stating: "Everyone present at this rally is taking a stand against the

mountain of lies and deception aimed at blackening Assange's name and undermining his credibility."

Marshall stressed the need to "educate, inform and explain that the fight to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, and defend WikiLeaks, is essential to the fight to defend the democratic and social rights of the entire working class."

James Cogan, who delivered the main address, declared that "Manning's defiance of the Grand Jury in Virginia last Friday, which has manufactured criminal indictments against Assange, is an inspiration to every worker and young person fighting for social and democratic rights." He relayed the personal thanks of Christine Assange to all those taking part.

Cogan condemned the corporate media's silence over the persecution of Assange and Manning, stating: "It has taken barely a few days for her re-imprisonment to disappear from the establishment media. It is as though she, like Assange, is being censored out of existence."

The SEP national secretary said: "Manning's actions are in stark contrast to the complicity in Assange's persecution by a myriad of organisations that have lined up with the militarist agenda of Labor and the Coalition, so refuse to defend a journalist and publisher committed to exposing great power criminality and intrigue."

Cogan reiterated the demand that the Australian government take immediate action to secure the release of Assange, and his safe passage to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

He stressed, however: "We are not making appeals to the Australian establishment, to either the Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government or to the Labor Party headed by that pro-US servant of Australian big business, Bill Shorten. We are appealing to the working class and youth of Australia and the world."

Cogan explained the renewed detention of Manning made clear US prosecutors were seeking to charge Assange over WikiLeaks for the 2010 publication of US army Iraq and Afghan war logs and hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables. This underscored that the vendetta against Assange

is aimed at abolishing press freedom and suppressing any exposure of government war crimes and diplomatic intrigues.

Cogan condemned the Australian media and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, which claims to represent journalists, for lining up behind the attacks on the WikiLeaks founder.

To strong applause, Cogan emphasised that the SEP would make the defence of Assange a central issue in the forthcoming Australian federal election.

He concluded: “The most important task we face, however, is to bring the working class into this struggle. The fight to free Assange must become part of all the actions by workers, over their conditions, education and health care, in defence of democratic rights, against the threat of climate change and against the danger of war.”

Sue Phillips, the national convenor of the Committee for Public Education, an organisation of rank-and-file teachers initiated by the SEP to wage a struggle against the assault on education by Labor, the Liberals and the unions, spoke next.

Phillips stressed that the persecution of Assange is “part of a global assault on the fundamental rights of young people and the working class, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom from internet censorship, and from dictatorship and war.”

She stated: “The same governments silencing Assange are carrying out a social counter-revolution against the conditions of the workers, consciously targeting students’ and educators’ rights to a fully-resourced high-quality public education.”

Phillips pointed to the re-emergence of the working class into mass social and political struggle, emphasising that this was the social constituency for the defence of Manning, Assange and all democratic rights. She reviewed a series of teachers’ struggles across the world, which have largely been organised by teachers through social media, in opposition to the corporatised trade unions.

The speaker read a message of support for the rally from a rank-and-file committee of teachers in the US city of Oakland. She also cited a resolution passed by teachers at Footscray Secondary College in Melbourne, demanding that the Australian government act to free Assange.

She called for these expressions of opposition to be broadened, and for widespread discontent to be transformed “into an international political movement of the working class and youth.”

Evrin Yazgin, president of the IYSSE club at the University of Melbourne, was the final speaker. He told the rally: “Our international movement, and its youth section, the IYSSE, will not accept the renewed attack on Manning, or the attempts to prosecute Julian Assange. We will mount

a campaign at universities, TAFEs and college campuses, across the country and internationally, to demand the immediate release of Manning and freedom for Assange.”

Yazgin stressed that Manning’s actions in 2010, and her defiance of the Grand Jury last Friday, were the “highest expression of a political radicalisation of millions of students and young people around the world.

“It is up to us to show the same determination and fight that Manning has displayed,” Yazgin said. “Everywhere the call must go out: Hands off Chelsea Manning! Free Julian Assange!”

Yazgin explained that the support of Labor and Liberal-National governments for the persecution of Assange was because they did not want WikiLeaks alerting young people to the war crimes, diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance that the Australian state is intimately involved in.

He condemned those organisations that had once supported Assange, but have since abandoned him. Yazgin explained that this reflected a shift to the right by organisations representing the affluent upper middle-class, amid the resurgence of the class struggle.

Concluding the rally, Marshall appealed for all those in attendance to take part in the ongoing fight for the freedom of Assange and Manning. He sent greetings to the London rally, which began at 3 p.m., outside the Ecuadorian embassy where Julian Assange has been arbitrarily detained for approaching seven years.

Interviews with participants and the speeches delivered at the rally will be published over the coming days.

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