

Workers and young people speak out at Melbourne rally to free Assange and Manning

By our reporters
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Around 300 workers, students, young people, professionals and retirees attended a rally in Melbourne on March 10 to demand that the Australian government take immediate action to free Julian Assange and the release of Chelsea Manning, who has been reimprisoned in the US by the Trump administration in a bid to coerce her into testifying against WikiLeaks.

The diverse audience at the event expressed the real attitude of ordinary people to Assange, Manning and the assault on democratic rights, which is censored by the corporate press and the official political establishment. Broad layers of the population rightly view Assange and Manning as heroic figures, who are being persecuted for exposing the truth about US-led war crimes, illegal diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance.

The sentiments of those who rallied are an indictment of Labor and Liberal-National governments, which have joined the persecution of Assange. They are also a condemnation of the various organisations that once claimed to defend Assange, such as the unions, the Greens and the pseudo-left, that have since abandoned the WikiLeaks founder and are now silent on the treatment of Chelsea Manning.

Lauren said: “I came to the rally because I think we’re being threatened every day by attacks on freedom of speech, by low wages and by a whole host of things. The world is going crazy. It’s important that we stand up for Julian Assange. If they get him, it’s a defeat for all of us. What’s happening to Chelsea Manning is disgraceful. I’m proud that she has so much integrity and that she’s telling that Grand Jury to get stuffed.

“Governments want to shut down everyone’s freedom of speech. They’ll start with the journalists and publishers and then they’ll come for everyone else. That will give them total power over us. The working class has been waking up. Governments put pressure on the working class to shut us up, but as soon as we’ve got a bit

of information, the powers that be get nervous, because we could rise up against them all.

“We have businesses putting the screws on us all the time. I have a grandson who has just started high school and I also noticed that his education is all geared to what he might get at the end of it, which is some low-paid job. It’s like you’re born on this planet now to work. They just want fodder.”

Julian commented: “I came because I’ve been following the issue of Assange on the internet for a long time, mostly on Twitter and alternative media. I thought this was something that I should support. The attacks on Assange are rubbish. Governments are obviously scared of him, because he’s telling the truth. There’s a big effort to silence him and to shut him away. It’s pretty obvious what’s going on if you’re taking notice. It’s an attack on the democratic rights of the whole population.

“The response of the press strikes me as strange. They claim to defend freedom of the press and get all upset because Trump said some nasty things to a CNN reporter, but they have a colleague who’s been locked up for almost seven years and they’re not saying anything about it. They’re part of the same machine. They’re part of the whole establishment that’s working together to shut us all down.”

Zac, who is studying audio engineering, stated: “The persecution of Julian forms the crux of a larger issue. With the rise of the internet and information technology, the means to access information has expanded dramatically. But governments and the corporations have put up huge walls to try and prevent us from finding the facts. Julian stands against that.

“Control of information has been so concentrated in the hands of distributors, like the social media companies. The means of distribution are extremely locked up for ordinary people.

“I feel the same way about Manning as I do about

Julian. She's exercising her right not to incriminate herself or Julian. I'm an American citizen, so the attacks on her are an encroachment on my rights as well.

"I completely agree with the idea that the defence of Assange and Manning has to be connected to other struggles, including against climate destruction. I really agree with what's been said here."

Carina, a Chinese international student, said: "The rally was really good and I enjoyed the speeches. We are international citizens. We are the targets of the governments and their corruption. We should stand up to give power to our voice and to protect all of us.

"I really agree with the speaker who said that 'Julian Assange is not just a person. He is our voice.' This issue really affects the next generations. It is about the future of young people and the fight for equality in the world. I really respect what the SEP is doing."

Zahrah, a first-year journalism student at RMIT University, explained: "In year 12, I did a year-long project and I used a lot of material from WikiLeaks. I didn't know that the government was watching us. I saw all these documentaries and I really woke up.

"I'm not surprised by the actions of governments against Assange. He is the one who's taking a stand. I didn't know that people were still rallying for him. I'm really glad that young people still care about him. I heard someone saying, 'Who is Julian Assange?' So many young people just don't know.

"With social media, it's so easy to filter information. Facebook and Google have introduced new algorithms to stop the flow of information. As it was said in the rally, there has been hardly any coverage in the mainstream media about Chelsea Manning and her arrest. It is so easy not to realise what is happening around you if you are just looking at your phone. It is going to be of a process, but I hope we can get there."

Di travelled to the rally from Euroa, a town 150 kilometres from Melbourne, "because Julian Assange has been incarcerated for speaking truths and I am tired of Australia being a whore of the USA." Di learnt about the rally on Facebook by following the SEP and Unity4J.

"Julian Assange did nothing wrong," she said. "The Australian government should be utterly ashamed. Integrity, being honourable, is what I was raised with, but there is none of that in any of our politics in this country any more. People need to wake up and speak out. It's civil disobedience that we need to activate. We need to wear Yellow Vests and we need to mass as a nation and say 'stop impinging on our freedom of speech.'

"Assange wasn't doing it for himself. He was doing it to wake up the world. There are school kids from Euroa coming to Melbourne on Friday to march and strike against the climate change agenda of this government and I am so proud of that."

Yvonne, a retired public sector worker, travelled 200 kilometres from Apollo Bay to take part. She commented: "In the public service you are forced, if you want to keep your job, to say nothing about most things. It just shows how restrained we are in the community from speaking the truth.

"I can't see that Assange has done anything wrong. We are a terribly corrupt country when you get to the bottom of it. He went to the Ecuadorian embassy because it was the only place that he felt safe. It's incredible that an Australian, from the so-called 'land of the fair go,' had to do that."

Yvonne condemned growing militarism and war. "Every time we send our sons and daughters off to war, every time the Australian government spends more money on another Joint Strike Fighter, they're neglecting the welfare of the community. One of those awful fighters would probably keep the welfare cheques going for years, just one of them.

Christina, a retired educator, found out about the rally via the SEP website and WikiLeaks. She said: "We can vote for candidates who are supposed to represent us, but it is restricted. There are lobby groups and corruption. They represent the top 1 percent and their cronies—the top 10 percent that are working for them.

"Julian Assange is known in Syria, in Africa, in the US, in Latin America, everywhere. That's why an ex-Nobel Prize winner has nominated Julian for the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, because of his unrelenting work. Julian is not alone, he is supported by thousands of people of integrity.

"This is the litmus test. We either win this or, if Julian doesn't receive freedom, if Chelsea Manning is not released, then we are going down a slippery slope. Its history repeating itself. That's why I am here. There are millions of honest citizens everywhere and we are going to win. The truth always wins so eventually."

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