

SEP (Australia) rallies demand freedom for Julian Assange

By our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held rallies in Sydney and Melbourne yesterday, opposing the illegal termination of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's political asylum and calling for a mass movement of workers and young people to secure his freedom.

The protests were held less than 24 hours after Assange was hauled out of Ecuador's London embassy and arrested by British police. Assange is being held on bogus bail charges and faces extradition proceedings by the US government, which is seeking to prosecute him for his role in WikiLeaks' exposure of US war crimes, illegal diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance.

Christine Assange, the WikiLeaks founder's mother, endorsed the SEP protests, issuing a statement urging all people "to attend the rallies tomorrow to demand that the Australian government act urgently to protect Julian and bring him home."

The Australian protests reflected a groundswell of opposition to the attack on Assange, with demonstrations held in London, the United States and in Germany.

Each Australian rally was attended by more than 150 people. Participants included office workers, teachers, construction and power workers, students, young people and retirees. Some protesters had travelled up to five hours to take a stand.

Prominent defenders of Assange took part. His father John Shipton attended the Melbourne rally. Somerset Bean, a well-known British graphic designer and WikiLeaks supporter, was also present. In Sydney, Mary Kostakidis, a well-known former TV news presenter, participated, alongside defenders of democratic rights who have supported Assange for over a decade. Protesters who had earlier assembled outside the UK consulate in Sydney marched to Martin Place to join the SEP rally.

Livestream videos of the protests have been viewed by more than 5,000 people around the world.

Reflecting the nervousness of the Australian authorities over widespread support for Assange, there was a substantial police presence at the Sydney rally, including

officers from the riot and public order squad.

Chairing the Sydney protest, SEP assistant national-secretary Cheryl Crisp declared: "The SEP unequivocally condemns the arrest of Julian Assange and the illegal termination of his political asylum.

"While the Ecuadorian and British governments bear clear responsibility for this situation, it is the Australian political establishment that has created the conditions for this to have taken place. Governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, have abandoned the Australian citizen, refused to exercise their legal and diplomatic powers to secure his safe passage back to this country."

Crisp said that the Labor government of Julia Gillard had played a central role in the persecution of Assange, having falsely accused WikiLeaks of "illegal acts" in 2011.

She said the venomous hostility of the political establishment to Assange was demonstrated by a tweet reshared by deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek on Friday, which denounced Assange's supporters as "cultists" and slanderously accused the WikiLeaks founder of having "worked as an agent of a proto fascist state, Russia, to undermine democracy."

Oscar Grenfell, International Youth and Students for Social Equality national convenor, said that Assange's arrest was "an historic political crime." Grenfell is the SEP's candidate for the seat of Parramatta in the Australian federal elections.

"The working class and young people in this country and around the world will not accept this," Grenfell said. "We cannot, because the attack on Assange is an attack on all of our democratic rights. What is being established is nothing less than a precedent for the suppression of free speech and freedom of the press."

Nick Beams, a decades-long leader of the SEP, declared: "Friends, defenders of democratic rights, April 11, 2019, will go down in history as a day of infamy. On that day, in London, the democratic right of asylum, fought for in hundreds of years of struggle, was defiled, torn-up, trampled on and ground into the dirt."

Beams placed the attacks on Assange in the context of the deepening crisis of world capitalism and the resurgence of the class struggle internationally. He explained that Assange's persecution was being carried out by governments terrified of mounting social opposition from the working class.

To strong applause, Beams stated: "Julian Assange has performed his duty as a journalist to workers, to youth, to the mass of ordinary people around the world. Now, we are obliged to repay that debt which we owe him. To rally, to organise, to agitate, to develop a movement in his defence.

"And not just because of what's he's done, but because of what it means for us. Because that defence of democratic rights is integral to the defence of the rights of the working class as a whole, the world over. His cause is our cause. His defence is our defence."

Mike Head, a WSWS correspondent and the SEP candidate for Oxley in Brisbane, warned that "The arrest of Julian Assange is not just about the past crimes he has exposed. It's also a warning of the future crimes being prepared."

Head denounced the response of the Liberal-National government and the Labor Party to Assange's arrest. They had made clear, he said, that both parties were participating in the international conspiracy against Assange and were doing nothing to defend his democratic rights.

In Melbourne, Sue Phillips, an SEP member and the convener of the Committee to Defend Public Education, declared: "Assange is a hero who has courageously revealed to the international working class the filthy operations of the US government, their horrific war crimes and mass spying operations against the masses of ordinary people.

"Assange and WikiLeaks' revelations have educated and changed the consciousness of masses of ordinary people. They have lifted the veil of secrecy, inspiring the overthrow of corrupt and criminal governments in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere."

Peter Byrne, the SEP's candidate for the seat of Calwell in Melbourne, noted that the Australian government had recently intervened to secure the release of Hakeem Al-Araibi, an Australian resident who had been threatened with extradition from Thailand to his native Bahrain. He condemned the Australian government for refusing to provide the same assistance to Assange.

Patrick O'Connor, a WSWS correspondent and teacher, declared: "We are here to take a stand against the crime that was carried out in central London yesterday, with Julian Assange dragged out in a Gestapo-like raid. What is underway marks the apogee of nearly a decade of concerted conspiracy on the part of Canberra, Washington, and London."

Caitlin Johnstone, a prominent online journalist, told the rally: "Today is the day when the nice guy mask has been ripped from the face of the inverted totalitarian state under whose boot we live." She said Assange was being "bullied by the power whose wrongdoings he exposed. And those powerful people want to make an example of him and send a message to all of us.

"Australian politicians and the Australian media have been put on notice as of today—we will not lie down quietly..." Johnstone said.

Evrin Yazgin, a leading member of the IYSSE, declared: "The IYSSE will do everything it can to take forward this crucial fight to build the mass movement that will secure Julian Assange's freedom!"

Tessa Pietsch, an SEP candidate for the Senate and the president of the IYSSE at the University of Melbourne, where Assange once studied, stated: "Julian Assange had led the fight to expose the war crimes, spying on citizens and illegal activities of capitalist governments.

"Young people need to know, we want to know, what our governments are doing behind closed doors. We will not accept the persecution of Assange or the censorship of the internet!"

The Melbourne rally was reported on by the *Age*, one of the city's most prominent daily publications. It highlighted the attendance of Shipton and featured comments from O'Connor and Byrne. The *Age* article was the only mention, in the mainstream media, of the SEP rallies, with the corporate press maintaining its blackout of SEP events in defence of the WikiLeaks founder over the past 18 months.

Concluding the Sydney rally, Crisp stressed that the SEP would make the persecution of Assange a central issue in the upcoming elections. She said that the protests were only the beginning of a protracted fight that would be waged by the SEP for the WikiLeaks founder's freedom.

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