

“Is there going to be a future for journalism?”

Australian media workers denounce police raids

By our correspondents
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Media workers around Australia held rallies on Friday to protest against federal police raids this week targeting journalists at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and News Corp. Denouncing the direct attack on journalists and free speech, they held placards declaring: “Journalism is not a crime.”

As well as ABC workers, journalists and their co-workers at many media offices, including the Nine Media newspapers and the other public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), took part.

For publishing or even “receiving” leaked documents exposing war crimes perpetrated by the Special Air Service (SAS) in Afghanistan or plans to legalise domestic mass surveillance by the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the journalists named in the search warrants could be jailed for up to seven years under the Crimes Act.

ABC workers spoke to the WSWs at the state-funded broadcaster’s Sydney headquarters, the site of Wednesday’s eight-hour police operation. Workers voiced their alarm about the police raid and drew connections with the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. Each spoke anonymously for fear of victimisation.

One ABC technician said: “What’s the meaning of freedom of speech? Journalism has apparently been turned into a crime. Or journalists can now be considered spies, or journalists can be considered enemies of the people. Where do you draw the line?”

Referring to the draconian secrecy provisions contained in the “foreign interference” laws that the Coalition government pushed through parliament last year with the Labor Party’s assistance, he commented:

“These laws are totally unjust. How are people to

know about important world issues if journalists can be prosecuted? If governments want to employ these kinds of laws, it is clear they have something to hide. If they have nothing to hide, why implement the laws?”

He agreed that the raids were conducted to cover up the activities of the SAS and the ASD, because these agencies are central to the US-integrated military-intelligence apparatus. “That is the crux,” he said. “The relationship and links are undeniable.”

Asked if he was shocked when police came into the building, he replied: “Yes and no. There’s been tensions building up with the ABC, with the government accusing the ABC of leftist bias, but in regard to ‘national security’ these kinds of raids don’t surprise me. And it’s not just the ABC. A News Corp journalist was raided as well the day before and, as you say, it’s happening in France right now. So what’s happened here doesn’t surprise me at all.”

The technician agreed that the attacks by governments on journalists had accelerated since the April 11 arrest of Assange. “Yes. Like him or hate him, Julian Assange is obviously a very complicated character, but he was exercising his right to publish to the public what he thought the public needed to see. Which is no different from what a journalist is paid to do. Any journalist who gets prosecuted under these new laws for doing their job—that’s outlandish.

“To me, it goes against the morals of a free world society. Under our constitution we have a right to free speech. When you start throwing people in jail when they exercise that right, who’s the bigger criminal?”

Discussing the global campaign by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Parties to defend Assange and Manning, he agreed with the warnings we have issued

about the precedent set by their jailing.

“Exactly, it does worry me to the core. If this can be executed right now, how much further are they going to take this? Is there going to be a future for journalism if people are going to be scared away by the threat of prosecution?”

Speaking of the police raids, another ABC worker said: “It’s 1984 all over again. It’s a very Orwellian move and terrifying to see what comes next. It’s concerning. I was shocked. I was here, and I didn’t know what to expect, because I read it on the news and I was very surprised that this was happening.”

She linked the raids to last year’s passage of the new secrecy laws as part of the “foreign interference” legislation. “The legislation was brought in last year, and now they’re acting on it retrospectively. They are bringing in lots of these laws, while people are not noticing, because other things are going on. So it’s a bit scary. And the government is so completely involved. Their denial is ridiculous.”

Asked about the government’s determination to keep the operations of the SAS and ASD shrouded in secrecy, she was adamant. “This is public interest. That is why this is very concerning. I don’t think it’s actually ‘national security.’ The information that’s been reported is not impacting us necessarily security-wise. It’s information we need to know as members of the public, and it’s concerning when that is being scrutinised. Who knows when censorship laws might come into place after this?”

Commenting on the opening of the floodgates against journalists via the persecution of Assange, she said: “It’s a bit of concern really. What is this? It’s like having thought police. It’s all very upsetting and we need to keep questioning and scrutinising what’s going on, and not give up on that.”

Another ABC worker who was in the building when the police arrived said: “I was shocked by what happened. People in the UK were worried too. I was skypeing with a friend there last night. There’s been world reaction, like on CNN. They’re absolutely mortified by it.”

He added: “I think it’s abhorrent what happened. The ABC is charged with being fair and unbiased. How can the ABC do its job if things like this are happening? The AFP [Australian Federal Police] denies this is government meddling, but who does the AFP work for?

Would we be allowed to investigate that? Now there’s another question!”

Asked if the vendetta against Assange had opened the door for such police-state moves, he replied: “Yes, I wouldn’t like to be a journalist at the moment. It does have shades of Nazism and all the rest of it. It is truly frightening. If—and this is a big if—if something is not done, how can we stop this?”

Responding to the WSWS’s fight to develop a worldwide movement of the working class against the assault on media freedom and basic democratic rights, he said: “This is not just an issue for the working class, but for any right-minded thinking people. But before you know it, the ‘peasants’ will be revolting!”

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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