

Powerful response to call for stepped-up fight to free Assange and Manning at SEP (Australia) meeting

By our reporters
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An overflow crowd of more than 80 workers, students and young people unanimously passed a resolution calling for a stepped-up fight for the freedom of imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning, at a Socialist Equality Party public meeting in Melbourne on Sunday.

The event concluded a series of SEP meetings in Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, the central Australian city of Alice Springs and in Wellington, New Zealand. It was held just over two months before British court hearings for Assange's extradition to the United States, where he faces espionage charges and life imprisonment for exposing US war crimes.

The Melbourne meeting was attended by a diverse audience, including students from the University of Melbourne and Victoria University, high school pupils, working class youth from the city's outer suburbs, factory workers, professionals and retirees. Some had been following the SEP's campaign for a number of months, others had seen posters, leaflets and online advertisements for the meeting.

Chairing the meeting, Patrick O'Connor, a leading SEP member, stressed that there was a groundswell of support for Assange and Manning, expressed in open letters signed by hundreds of doctors, lawyers and journalists condemning the WikiLeaks founder's persecution.

O'Connor detailed the lawless character of Assange's treatment by the British authorities, including his detention in conditions of virtual solitary confinement, the denial of adequate medical care and a refusal to provide him with unfettered access to his lawyers and documents crucial to preparing his defence.

The chair emphasised the courageous conduct of Manning, who has been imprisoned by the US government for refusing to provide perjured testimony against Assange. To spontaneous applause, O'Connor quoted Manning's defiant statement earlier this year, in which she declared: "The idea I hold the keys to my own cell is an absurd one, as I face the prospect of suffering either way due to this unnecessary and punitive subpoena: I can either go to jail or betray my principles. The latter exists as a much worse prison than the government can construct."

Delivering the main report, Oscar Grenfell, a frequent contributor to the WSWS, stressed that the upsurge of support for Assange and Manning was inseparable from the growth of the

class struggle internationally.

Grenfell explained that the US attempt to extradite and prosecute Assange was the spearhead of a turn by governments around the world to authoritarian measures, in response to mounting social and political opposition from workers and young people.

The WikiLeaks founders' arrest in April had already emboldened governments, including in Australia, to crackdown on free speech and press freedom. Grenfell cited police raids last June targeting the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Canberra home of a News Corp journalist as evidence.

The speaker stressed that the growing signs of support for Assange were a "welcome development," that had to "built on and developed." He said that this raised crucial questions of political orientation.

Grenfell stated that important political lessons had to be learnt from the Labour Party's defeat in Thursday's British election. He noted that some supporters of democratic rights had claimed that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was "Assange's great hope."

Corbyn, however, had remained silent on Assange's plight throughout the election campaign. He had not so much as mentioned the WikiLeaks founder since April. Corbyn's refusal to take a stand in defence of Assange was inseparable from his capitulation to the right-wing Blairites within the Labour Party on every question.

Corbyn had made clear that if elected prime minister, he would be a "faithful servant of the criminals within his own party who orchestrated the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003." This had opened the door for Boris Johnson, an extreme right-wing figure who is avowedly hostile to Assange, to sweep the election, despite a shift to the left among ordinary people.

Grenfell stated: "There are broader political conclusions that must be drawn from Corbyn's cowardly role. The fight for Assange's freedom will not be won by peddling illusions in capitalist politicians, or by issuing plaintive appeals to them."

He explained that the crucial task was to galvanize the mass support for Assange and Manning into a political movement of the working class consciously fighting for their freedom. Grenfell stressed that this was the only way an Australian government would be compelled to uphold its legal obligation to defend Assange, as an Australian citizen and journalist.

The speaker said that the SEP would hold demonstrations and rallies in the lead-up to the extradition hearing in February and encouraged all audience members to participate in the campaign for these events.

A lively question and answer period ensued. Audience members asked about the next stages of the campaign against the persecution of Assange and Manning. Others asked for a further elaboration of the WSWS's assessment of Corbyn's defeat, along with the SEP's attitude to a cross-parliamentary group recently formed by a group of Australian federal parliamentarians in Assange's defence.

One questioner asked whether the use of the phrase "working class" was outdated. He noted that the world was very different to that which existed during the Russian Revolution.

In reply, Grenfell and O'Connor explained that for all the developments of the past period, the fundamental wage-labour relationship between capitalists and workers remained. The working class was not limited to those who were employed in factories and industrial enterprises but included everybody who had nothing to sell but their ability to work.

The previous three decades had witnessed a vast growth of the international working class, which had become, for the first time in human history, the overwhelming majority of the world's population. Because of its unique role in the productive process, this international class, which was being propelled into mass social and political struggles, was alone capable of affecting the revolutionary transformation of society to meet social need, not private profit.

The speakers stressed that the fundamental issues that workers confronted at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution were returning in even more explosive forms. These included a massive growth of social inequality, an eruption of imperialist militarism and a turn to authoritarian forms of rule—issues that were all present in the persecution of Assange and Manning and the fight for their freedom.

After the discussion, the resolution was presented to the meeting and passed unanimously. It extended "full support to Chelsea Manning," and demanded her immediate release. It stated that "Assange must be freed without any conditions and fully compensated for the torment inflicted on him. He must be able to return to Australia, or wherever he chooses, so he can seek urgently required medical treatment, with a guaranteed immunity from any US extradition application."

WSWS reporters spoke to several of those who attended.

Emily, an unemployed worker, said: "I would do anything for Julian Assange. I would almost lay down my life for him, because I am so impressed that someone has taken this on. We need more people to speak out about the hidden workings of the state, the secret services and the intense regime of policing that we are seeing internationally.

"I think Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden have spearheaded the whole truth movement, towards not only becoming aware that this is the reality lying under the surface, but that we need to pull together and do something about it. That means, first of all, to educate ourselves and each other as to the true agenda of governments all around the world."

Andrew, a high school teacher, explained: "I read about the Footscray City College resolution defending Assange on the *World Socialist Web Site*. I'm hoping there'll be a lot more people joining in with these actions."

Andrew added that he saw a clear connection between his work as an educator and the fight for Assange's freedom: "I grew up in a time of relative optimism, in terms of how the world was progressing. It concerns me for the young people growing up today. They're seeing a world in which their options and the possibilities of freedom of expression and organisation are being restricted in so many ways. What's happening to Julian Assange is obviously a prime example of that."

He added that he has followed WikiLeaks since its 2010 revelations of US war crimes in Iraq: "Of course back then supporting WikiLeaks was mainstream. I remember I signed a petition that went in the *New York Times*, of Australians supporting Assange. Obviously since then the Swedish allegations, the Russia-gate allegations, have served their purpose in damaging his reputation. But there is momentum developing over the last few months so I'm hoping that we can build on that."

Andrew concluded: "It would be a terrible precedent in terms of the issue of extraterritoriality, that an Australian can be treated in this way, for crimes supposedly committed against the United States. No-one has ever suggested that WikiLeaks has published information that is false, or indeed, in terms of the Chelsea Manning revelations, that there was any hacking involved by WikiLeaks. What Julian Assange did is the work of an investigative journalist, that's what he's being charged with. Extradition to the US would be a terrible precedent."

Rita, a former law student, said: "I've been appalled by the treatment of Assange. It is a great threat to the independence of journalism. Assange exposed the crimes of the ruling class, especially crimes committed in the Middle East.

"I was impressed by the way the SEP understood the assault on Assange was the ruling class trying to censor the truth. The elites have engaged in the wholesale murder of peoples. It is important to expose the true nature of this. We must defend Assange and Manning who have done what they have done for all of us."

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