

Australia: Melbourne teachers vote to defend Assange and Manning

By the Committee to Defend Public Education (CFPE)
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On March 11, teachers representing their colleagues at the Maribyrnong regional meeting of the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Melbourne passed resolutions demanding that the Australian government immediately act to secure the freedom of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and voicing their solidarity with whistle-blower Chelsea Manning. The important stand taken by the teachers should be followed by workers in every workplace and industry around the world.

A mass movement of the working class must be built to defend Assange. In a historic attack on freedom of speech, the Trump administration has charged him with multiple counts of espionage because WikiLeaks published the information that was courageously leaked by Manning exposing war crimes committed by American imperialism in the Iraq and Afghanistan and the extent of US diplomatic intrigues around the world.

The US is attempting to extradite Assange from the United Kingdom. Extradition hearings began last month and will resume in May, in what is likely to be a protracted legal case. Assange has been denied bail and is being incarcerated in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison under harsh conditions. The Australian citizen has been subjected to constant psychological and physical torment for close to a decade and his life is in danger.

The first resolution passed at the meeting insisted that the Australian government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison end its complicit collaboration with the persecution of Assange and intervene, using the full scope of its diplomatic and legal powers, to secure his safe passage to Australia. A second motion aimed at widening the campaign in defence of Assange was also adopted. It requires the Australian Education Union (AEU) to publish the resolution in “the next issue of the AEU News and AEU e-bulletin.”

The Maribyrnong regional meeting was attended by some 20 teachers representing at least 10 schools in

Melbourne’s inner-western suburbs. It began with a discussion over the shocking conditions under which teachers must now work, such as unmanageable class sizes, excessive workloads and poverty-level wages for Education Support Staff. These conditions are a direct result of the agreements which the AEU has signed up for with state Liberal and Labor governments.

Teachers then voted to extend the duration of the meeting to allow for discussion on Assange.

The convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), Sue Phillips, moved the first resolution. She told her colleagues: “Assange has stated that he wants people at their workplaces to voice their support. The lead that teachers are taking in his defence must be advanced here by supporting this resolution.”

Phillips, a primary teacher at Moonee Ponds West Primary School, drew attention to the reason for Assange’s incarceration: “Why does Assange face this situation? Because in 2010–2011 he revealed US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with diplomatic conspiracies. He did what every good investigative journalist should do.

“For exposing the criminal and secret operations of governments, information in the public interest, he is being punished in the most brutal and anti-democratic manner.

“The purpose of his extradition and the political show trial that is underway, is to intimidate and terrorise all journalists who uncover and expose the truth. Anyone who dares speak out against war crimes is under threat.”

She explained that the aims of the US, Britain and Australia are demonstrated in the barbaric treatment of Assange.

“The manner in which Assange is being dealt with in the courts is an indication of the anti-democratic and cruel procedures that have been meted out against him over nearly a decade and what he would face in the US.

Anyone who suggests he is or will face a fair trial in the US is telling lies.

“On the first day Assange was handcuffed 11 times and stripped naked twice. He sits behind a glass cage, treated as if he is the worse type of criminal and terrorist. He can’t hear properly and cannot pass notes or speak to his lawyers. On one of the days the judge began the trial without Assange present in the court and another day he had prepared notes from the previous day and they were taken from him.”

The resolution stated:

“This meeting of teachers and education support staff opposes the ongoing persecution of journalist, publisher and founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, and courageous whistle-blower, Chelsea Manning. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, warns that Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life. We insist that the federal Morrison government uses its diplomatic powers to organise the safe return of Assange to Australia. We resolve to send this resolution to other schools and workplaces.”

In supporting the motion, Will Marshall, a member of the Committee for Public Education, stated: “Assange needs the support of workers, teachers and students. The courts are clearly not going to dispense justice. That is why we should be involved. Secondly, the major governments are preparing for war. The US has just announced the largest ever funding for the military. They are determined to stop Assange because they are preparing for new crimes and new wars.”

One teacher at the meeting pointed out, “Assange has done nothing illegal” and said that he should not be standing facing charges.

To this point, the Australian trade unions, including the AEU, have maintained a deafening silence on the question of Assange. This is above all due to their links with the Australian Labor Party, which held government in 2010 and, flowing from its support for the US-Australia military alliance, condemned WikiLeaks for exposing American war crimes. The unions’ collaboration with the persecution of Assange is one of the main reasons that the Labor and, since 2013, the Coalition government has been able to deny any assistance to the Australian journalist and publisher.

At the conclusion of the Maribyrnong meeting, Daniel Mulholland, an Education Support Staff worker, stated: “Educators should defend Assange as if they were defending their own students. What sort of democracy do

we have when such arbitrary measures are taken to arrest and intimidate journalists?”

The CFPE has initiated resolutions at both school and regional union meetings calling for the defence of Assange and Manning. The regional meeting at Maribyrnong is the latest in a campaign that is building momentum to defend democratic rights and Julian Assange.

Teachers at Footscray High School, in Melbourne’s western suburbs, voted in December to oppose the extradition of Assange and to form a committee to take forward his defence. In February, a meeting of the Hills Association of the New South Wales Teachers Federation in north-west Sydney unanimously passed a similar resolution moved by Erika Laslett, a secondary teacher and member of the CFPE. The same resolution was moved by a CFPE supporter and passed unanimously by more than 30 teachers at a meeting of the Illawarra Teachers Association in Wollongong.

All workers who defend Assange, Manning and freedom of speech should likewise organise meetings at unionised and non-union sites and move resolutions calling for the freedom of Assange and Manning.

Hold meetings in your workplace, college, university or school to discuss the imminent threat to Assange’s life and the dangers this poses to the democratic rights of the entire working class. Pass resolutions demanding the blocking of his extradition to the US and his immediate and unconditional freedom.

Teachers and education workers who want to make contact with the CFPE can email cfpe.aus@gmail.com or via its Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/. The CFPE Twitter account is @CFPE_Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>