

Vigils in New Zealand demand freedom for Julian Assange

By our reporters
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Supporters of Julian Assange attended vigils in Wellington and Auckland on July 2 and July 3. The events called by Free Assange NZ were part of global protests marking the WikiLeaks founder's 49th birthday, his second spent in horrific conditions in London's maximum security Belmarsh Prison.

Candles4Assange, a network of protest groups, announced that events were held in at least 30 cities across 16 countries, including Australia, Germany, Britain, the US, Canada, Mexico and Brazil.

The UK government is seeking to hand Assange over to the United States to be imprisoned for the rest of his life. The courageous publisher and journalist has been persecuted over the past decade by successive US governments and their allies, including Britain and Australia, for revealing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, illegal surveillance by the CIA, and Washington's anti-democratic machinations throughout the world.

In Wellington, Free Assange NZ organiser Alex Hills declared at Thursday's rally outside parliament: "How many birthdays is this man going to be locked up for just reporting war crimes?" She said no other media organisation had the same record as WikiLeaks for revealing the truth.

A second vigil the following day in Cuba Street was addressed by Tom Peters from the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand).

He referred to the recent letter by 200 doctors in support of Assange, published in the leading medical journal, the *Lancet*, "once again denouncing the treatment of Assange as torture, sanctioned by the British government."

Assange is being kept in virtual isolation and is in a severe physical and psychological condition. He suffers from a respiratory illness that makes him particularly

vulnerable to coronavirus, which has spread in British prisons.

"Doctors for Assange denounced the UK, Australian and US governments, which have all collaborated in the attempt to railroad Assange into a US prison," Peters said. He described the ongoing extradition case as "a politically motivated show trial. It is an attempt to abolish the right of any journalist to publish true information about the illegal activities of governments and their military and intelligence agencies."

The speaker noted that the decade-long efforts to silence Assange and shut down WikiLeaks had set a precedent for increasingly violent and unrestrained attacks on journalists, including during the recent protests against police killings in the United States.

Every government, including New Zealand, was responding to the social crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic by attacking democratic rights, "strengthening the police and intelligence agencies, strengthening the military, and censoring the internet and intimidating journalists," Peters said.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government, a coalition of the Labour Party, the Greens and NZ First, had remained silent on the persecution of Assange because of its alliance with US imperialism. "New Zealand soldiers were involved in the Iraq and Afghan wars, and they too were exposed by WikiLeaks," he said.

The government is determined to prevent any repeat of such exposures, as it prepares to join future wars by spending billions of dollars on military upgrades. "The fight to free Assange is not a single issue campaign," Peters said. "[It] is intimately connected to the struggles of working people and young people against war, against inequality and the brutality of the state.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with some of

those attending the vigil.

Hassan said he participated because he put himself in the shoes of “the victims of atrocities that have happened in the past, that are happening now around the world and will happen in future if we don’t do something.

“Julian Assange is someone who is helping these victims. He’s trying to raise awareness so that this stops, and if we don’t do anything then we are accomplices to the perpetrators of these crimes. That’s why I’m here: to do something.”

WikiLeaks had exposed crimes that “we do hear in the news from some reporters, but what WikiLeaks did was to show tangible proof of what’s happening, based on which people should go to jail, and that’s not happening.” While Assange was jailed, “the perpetrators are being promoted. It’s inhuman,” he added.

Commenting on the police violence against protesters in the US, he noted that the US government was “calling on other countries to apply democracy when it, itself, is violating that daily.”

Kay said: “Assange is in prison because he showed war crimes. They don’t want us to know how many millions of people have been killed in these wars. Directly, through the bombing attacks and invasions, and then years after, through the destruction of infrastructure.”

Countries devastated by war were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic, she said. “How can you socially-distance in Gaza, and in refugee camps?”

Kay denounced the recent “lies about Russia paying the Taliban” to kill US soldiers, saying this was a diversion from the crimes of US forces who are still occupying Afghanistan. “Russia’s not fighting in Afghanistan, it’s just ludicrous.”

She pointed out that Assange was still in prison despite other non-violent prisoners being released as an emergency public health measure to mitigate the spread of coronavirus. This fact “shows how vicious the system is in Britain,” she said.

Kay also praised Chelsea Manning, the whistleblower who provided the Afghan and Iraq war logs to WikiLeaks, and who was jailed during the Obama and Trump administrations. “She was prepared to go to prison twice, and she wasn’t going to say anything because whatever she would say would be used against

Julian Assange. What huge courage and stamina! Very few people could put up with two rounds of imprisonment.”

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