Facebook escalates censorship of left-wing, anti-war organizations

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One year ago this week, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter to search monopoly Google demanding that it end its censorship of the internet.

The letter documented that a change in Google's search algorithms that the company claimed was aimed at promoting "authoritative" news sources had led to a substantial decline in search traffic to left-wing, socialist and anti-war sites. Google, the letter from WSWS International Editorial Board Chairperson David North stated, was "engaged in political censorship of the Internet."

One year later, it is clear that the allegations against Google were both correct and extremely prescient. The measures taken by Google initiated a sweeping system of corporate-state censorship adopted by all the US technology monopolies, including Facebook and Twitter. A campaign that began under the pretext of combatting "Russian meddling" and "fake news" is ever more openly targeting left-wing views.

The latest and most extreme attack on democratic rights came Tuesday, when Facebook announced that it has removed hundreds of user accounts and pages, many opposing the crimes of the American, Saudi, and Israeli governments in the Middle East, claiming they were the result of "influence campaigns" by Iran and Russia.

Some of the accounts purported to be "American liberals supportive of US Senator Bernie Sanders," who expressed "support for Palestinians and opposition to Israel," according to FireEye, the cybersecurity firm, heavily staffed by former intelligence operatives, with whom Facebook coordinated the deletions.

The press went even further in linking left-wing viewpoints with "foreign influence" operations. The *Financial Times* declared, "In the US, FireEye found accounts purporting to support Bernie Sanders, the US senator, and a fake organisation called Rise Against the Right. In the UK, the company discovered fabricated organisations called British Left and the British Progressive Front posting in support of Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party."

Virginia Democrat Mark Warner, who is leading the campaign for censorship, made clear that the internet giants' moves to censor the internet are far broader than the original pretext of Russian "meddling" in the 2016 election. "There's no way the problem of social media manipulation is limited to a single troll farm in St. Petersburg, and that fact is now beyond a doubt." He added, "Iranians are now following the Kremlin's playbook from 2016."

Tellingly, FireEye said that it had only "moderate confidence that this activity originates from Iranian actors." The company added that the possibility exists that "the activity could originate from elsewhere" or includes "authentic online behavior."

Wherever the accounts originate, it is not up to Facebook to determine whether they are "authentic" or not. Tellingly, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in a conference call with reporters, added that some of the accounts removed came from "a set of people the U.S. government and others have linked to Russia." Given that dominant sections of the US state have sought to brand anyone who opposes US foreign policy as an agent of the Kremlin, such a broad definition could extend to any public critic of the US political establishment.

On the same day that Facebook removed pages and accounts it said were "linked to Iran," it terminated the longstanding Facebook account of a WSWS contributor writing under a pseudonym, declaring that it would only reinstate the account if he provided government identification proving his identity.

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Were such a standard to apply across the board, social media posts by contemporary authors Stephen King (who writes as Richard Bachman), Anne Rice (who writes as Anne Rampling) and countless others would be "inauthentic" if they were to use the names by which they are known to by millions of people. Some of the most famous figures in the revolutionary movement, including Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, were known exclusively by their pen names. And of course, the American Federalist Papers and Anti-Federalist papers were all drafted by writers using pseudonyms.

Facebook, acting in coordination with government entities, serves as judge, jury and executioner in deciding who is granted the freedom of expression guaranteed under the First Amendment and international civil rights laws. It claims the right, with no trial, no appeal, and providing no information, to declare statements to be "inauthentic" and remove accounts making them.

Last month, Facebook deleted the official page of the left-wing counter-protest to this month's fascist "Unite the Right 2" demonstration in Washington, which was endorsed by prominent left-wing political activists, including whistleblower Chelsea Manning. Its rationale was that one account connected to the event page displayed "coordinated inauthentic behavior."

This week, the *Washington Post* reported that Facebook operates an internal ranking system to determine "the trustworthiness of its users on a scale from zero to 1." Those labeled "untrustworthy" will evidently be liable for deletion.

What is being introduced, piece by piece, is the mechanism for US technology monopolies to silence anyone, at any time, for any reason, by claiming their statements and views are "inauthentic" and "divisive."

Such a mechanism, tested and implemented in the privately-controlled social media ecosystems, will then, with the ending of net neutrality, be used by internet service providers to block access to sites on the public internet and through email, claiming the "responsibility" to police their privately-owned networks.

In other words, one year after the WSWS published its open letter, all the mechanisms have been created for Google, Facebook, Twitter and leading internet service providers to ban and silence anyone, with no legal recourse, oversight or public knowledge.

But in the year since the publication of the open letter, another process has emerged. The working class all over the world has entered into struggle, beginning with a wave of teachers' strikes in the US earlier this year, and continuing with strikes by heavy industry workers in Germany, airline pilots throughout Europe at Ryanair, and a growing opposition and anger among UPS workers, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class.

The moves to intensify censorship are aimed above all at blocking the intersection of this growing movement of the working class with a socialist program.

But this movement of the working class also creates the political basis for the struggle against censorship. As workers clash with their employers and their union collaborators, they must inscribe on their banners opposition to political censorship and must fight for the expropriation of the social media monopolies under public control as a key component of the fight for socialism.

In January of this year, the *World Socialist Web Site* issued an open letter calling for "socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive websites, organizations and activists" to join "an international coalition to fight Internet censorship." This appeal is more relevant than ever. We urge everyone seeking to fight the grip of the technology monopolies and intelligence agencies over the internet to contact us and join the fight against censorship!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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