

France hosts “Christchurch call” summit to intensify internet censorship

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The international “Christchurch call” summit held Wednesday in Paris, hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinta Ardern, marked a further step in the drive by the world’s capitalist governments and the corporate technology giants to censor social media and muzzle rising social opposition in the working class and among young people.

The meeting was held on the sidelines of the G7 summit and attended by seven heads of state, including British Prime Minister Theresa May, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and representatives from Ireland, Jordan, Senegal and Indonesia. Also in attendance was European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and Facebook’s head of global affairs Nick Clegg, the former British deputy prime minister, also took part, along with representatives from YouTube, Microsoft, Daily Motion, Google and Amazon.

Ardern and Macron announced the meeting last month following the Christchurch terrorist attack by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant, who slaughtered 51 people at two mosques in the New Zealand city on March 15. The fact that Tarrant live-streamed his heinous crime on social media is being utilized to increase demands for a crackdown on live-streaming and other forms of user content sharing.

While justifying a sweeping assault on free speech under the banner of fighting terrorism, this argument also serves to cover up the responsibility of the political establishments in France, New Zealand and internationally for promoting the climate of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism that led to the attack. It also serves to divert attention from the clear evidence that Australian and New Zealand police agencies took no action against Tarrant despite prior

warnings. (See: “New Zealand government bans fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto”).

Speaking at a joint press conference with Ardern Wednesday night, Macron declared that “what happened in Christchurch was ... the transformation of the internet into a machine for insane propaganda in the service of the fracturing of our society in a war of all against all.”

The “Christchurch call” is a vague non-binding pledge for governments and social media corporations to prevent the sharing of “terrorist and violent extremist content.” Ardern’s interview with *Le Monde* the day before the summit made clear that the meeting is only the thin end of the wedge for far broader censorship measures.

Asked by the *Le Monde* reporter “why you have chosen to focus uniquely on violent terrorist content, and not more broadly on hate speech, which also contributes to the drift in social media,” Ardern replied that “we had to find a point of departure to reach a consensus.” She continued: “So rather than opening the way for a debate on the risk of restricting freedom of expression, I preferred a point of departure on which we can agree: No one believes that the internet should serve for the spreading of murders.”

The real target of this gathering of technology billionaires and the political representatives of the capitalist elite was spelled out more openly last Friday in a French government report, published to coincide with a meeting that day between Macron and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The report, which was co-written by former Google France executive Benoît Loutrel, summarizes the results to date of the collaboration of Facebook with the French government, which involves French regulators being provided access to Facebook’s censorship offices.

“By permitting everyone to publish content and share it with other users, social media networks have revolutionized the media industry and mode of communication, offering to citizens and the civil society the opportunity of direct expression,” the report states. “Nonetheless, the possibilities provided by social media promote unacceptable abuses on the part of isolated individuals or of organized groups.”

The report states that social media has “created new forms of social relations, overcoming geographical (and even linguistic, thanks to translation services) constraints ... New forms of ‘online’ organizations of citizens, decentralized communities that are non-material but very real, have emerged for sharing information, as a center of interest or to affiliate around a cause to be defended.”

In other words, the development of social media technology has enabled workers and young people to communicate and organize struggles internationally, including the Yellow Vest protests in France against social inequality, the walkouts by teachers in the US, strikes by maquiladora auto parts workers in Mexico, and the recent global strike of Uber drivers. These are part of a growing wave of strikes and protests internationally over the past year that have been organized on social media and outside the control of pro-corporate trade union bureaucracies.

The response of capitalist governments and their subservient corporate-controlled media finds its sharpest expression in the savage persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in retaliation for doing what genuine journalists are supposed to do: expose the lies and crimes of governments, and the jailing of whistle-blower Chelsea Manning for taking the courageous step of facilitating such public exposures.

The corporate media are viewed with hostility and contempt among the working class and youth. The report noted that “a third of French and half of those aged 18-24 inform themselves via social media, and platforms for video sharing make up half the consumption of video information on the Internet.”

This is the real reason for the drive by the world’s governments to censor social media. The report states that “as a result of this capacity for communication and expression on a large scale, combined with a sentiment of relative anonymity and impunity [i.e., the right to

free speech], the social media networks are also places of sharing unacceptable content.”

Of course, the report does not discuss who determines what is “unacceptable”—a formula that justifies unlimited censorship by the capitalist state.

It adds that “we observe the impact on the social order” of “false information,” “unfounded rumors” and “the actions of individuals pursuing political or financial objectives.” It calls for a “struggle against content that is damaging for users and for social cohesion.”

The claim that “social cohesion” in France and Europe is being undermined by “false information” and “unfounded rumors,” rather than the staggering rise of inequality and poverty and the policies of militarism and austerity of the political establishment, is no less ludicrous than the assertion by the Democratic Party and publications such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the US that the source of growing social opposition is Russian meddling and “fake news.”

Following the meeting with Macron, Zuckerberg declared in a Facebook post that the company’s collaboration with the French government was a “model” for what Facebook would like to introduce in other countries. This would address “how we should handle content that isn’t illegal but might cause harm,” he wrote, “and this is an area where I believe companies should not make these decisions by themselves.”



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