

New Zealand PM leads global Internet censorship campaign

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The so-called “Christchurch Call” summit in Paris on Wednesday, led by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron, marked a significant escalation of the drive by governments throughout the world to censor the Internet.

Ardern and her Labour Party-led government, along with the Australian and French governments, are taking a leading role in exploiting the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attacks by Australian fascist Brenton Tarrant to justify sweeping attacks on freedom of expression. Tarrant live-streamed a video of the shootings, which killed 51 people, on Facebook.

The “summit” issued a statement signed by 17 governments, including the UK, France, Australia, India, Indonesia, Canada and Germany, along with Facebook, Twitter, Google and other tech giants. The statement agreed to “eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content” on social media platforms and other websites, and to steer people toward officially-sanctioned “positive” alternatives or “counter-narratives.” The US government did not sign, but a White House statement expressed agreement with the statement’s “overarching message.”

No one should be fooled by worthless assurances that these governments and corporate giants will protect “freedom of expression.” What constitutes “terrorist” or “extremist” material will be decided by the state agencies.

For the past two years, corporations such as Google and Facebook have collaborated with the US and other governments to severely restrict access to left-wing, socialist and anti-war websites, particularly the WSWWS. Their algorithms have been modified to reduce traffic to these sites, while promoting supposedly “authoritative” websites, i.e., the corporate media, in

search results and news feeds. These measures, justified with lies about combating “fake news” and Russian and Chinese “interference,” are now being escalated under the guise of fighting “extremism.”

The New Zealand prime minister, having been glorified in the media internationally for showing “kindness” and “compassion” following the Christchurch shootings, has become one of the chief propagandists for censorship internationally.

An op-ed column by Ardern in the May 11 *New York Times*, with the misleading headline “How to Stop the Next Christchurch Massacre,” blamed the attack on social media and lax gun controls, while covering up its political roots. She made no mention of the fascist, anti-immigrant and white supremacist ideology that motivated the gunman, apart from a hypocritical sentence about the need to “tackle racism and discrimination.”

Far from opposing racism, Ardern’s Labour Party-led coalition government includes the racist and xenophobic New Zealand First Party, whose leader Winston Peters has made numerous anti-Muslim statements. Labour and Ardern herself have vowed to cut immigration. They have echoed NZ First’s nationalist demagoguery and adopted many of its anti-immigrant policies. After the 2017 election, Ardern made Peters foreign minister and deputy prime minister, giving his right-wing nationalist party significant power in the government, despite the fact that it received just over 7 percent of the votes.

Ardern wrote that the Paris agreement “is not about undermining or limiting freedom of speech.” In her “Christchurch Call” speech, she again rejected concerns “that this action plan we are endorsing today is about curbing freedom of expression.”

Such assurances are belied by the actions of the

Labour government since the Christchurch attacks. It has worked with the corporate media to suppress public discussion about the causes of the atrocity. Tarrant's manifesto, which reveals the similarity of his anti-immigrant, nationalist views to those of NZ First, US President Donald Trump and other political parties in Australia and across Europe, has been banned. Anyone caught with the document could face a lengthy prison sentence.

Likewise, media organisations have agreed to self-censor their coverage of Tarrant's upcoming trial, so as not to report on his fascist statements, precisely in order to obscure the connection to the foul right-wing politics of all the establishment parties.

This unprecedented censorship is also aimed at preventing discussion about Tarrant's sympathy for the military and police, and why the intelligence agencies and police failed to prevent the Christchurch attack, despite repeated warnings. A royal commission of inquiry, which began this week ostensibly to look into these questions, is so far being held in secret.

More sweeping and permanent censorship mechanisms are being planned. A foundation established by former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark has recommended a new regulatory body specifically to police social media. It would have the power to take websites like Facebook completely offline, as happened in Sri Lanka following the terrorist attacks in April. The Helen Clark Foundation's report, "Anti-Social Media: Reducing the spread of harmful content on social networks," also calls for restrictions on the ability to live-stream videos.

Already, the Australian government has seized on the Christchurch attacks to rush legislation through parliament that will impose severe fines and prison sentences on social media executives who fail to remove material that the government deems "abhorrent" and "violent." This could include videos, photos and articles that expose police brutality, war crimes and fascist assaults on immigrants.

Such laws have nothing to do with fighting racism, terrorism or "fake news." They will be used against the working class and its ability to organise against war and social inequality. It is no accident that the "Christchurch Call" was hosted by Macron. His right-wing government and the French media have slandered the anti-austerity "yellow vest" protests, involving

hundreds of thousands of workers, as violent and anti-Semitic, in order to justify brutal police crackdowns and the arrest of protesters.

New Zealand's ruling class has also been shaken by protests and strikes over the past year, including by teachers and healthcare workers. The corporatist trade union bureaucracy has expressed hostility and nervousness over workers organising independently and sharing information on social media.

The contempt for freedom of speech shared by all the governments that signed the "Christchurch Call" is most starkly revealed in their support for the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. They face lengthy imprisonment or even the death penalty for exposing US-led war crimes and other government-corporate abuses. The New Zealand parliament last year refused to even discuss a petition presented by Assange's supporters calling for Ardern to offer him asylum.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, with escalating social inequality, trade war and US threats of war against Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, China and Russia, the ruling elites are returning to the methods of the 1930s and 1940s. Governments are whipping up racism and xenophobia to divide workers, while desperately seeking to censor information, in order to prevent the emergence of a mass anti-war and anti-capitalist movement.



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