

New Zealand PM promotes internet censorship at UN

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30 September 2019

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used her visit to New York for the United Nations General Assembly to accelerate global efforts to censor the internet. Her government is playing a leading role in exploiting the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attack to promote international mechanisms to block or take down online material that governments deem “extremist.”

The so-called Christchurch Call, an agreement between several governments and tech companies launched in May in Paris, was expanded at a special UN meeting with the addition of 33 signatories, including Denmark, Mexico, Belgium and South Korea. The agreement is intended to further concentrate power in the hands of governments and technology giants to remove content from the internet.

The Christchurch Call has nothing to do with preventing attacks such as the massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in March. The gunman, Brenton Tarrant, like numerous mass killers in the US, was inspired by US President Donald Trump and other extreme-right leaders, who are being consciously promoted by the ruling elites internationally. Trump’s fascist rant to the UN on September 24 echoed Tarrant’s manifesto with its violent hostility to socialism and glorification of nationalism.

The day before Trump’s speech, Ardern gushed to reporters that she had “an excellent meeting” with Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien. Ardern said Trump showed “interest” in the Christchurch Call. Washington, while not a formal signatory to it, had “a really good level of participation and support,” and US-based tech companies had signed.

Ardern’s speech at the UN, with its references to

“kindness” and diversity, and criticism of “fierce nationalism or self-interest,” was widely contrasted in the media with Trump’s statements. Such statements were thoroughly hypocritical. Ardern’s Labour Party-led coalition includes the right-wing populist NZ First Party, which has made numerous anti-Muslim and anti-Chinese statements. The government has restricted immigration and enforced a racist ban on refugees from African countries.

Ardern’s speech stressed global “interconnection,” mainly in order to argue for a crackdown on social media and the internet. This was needed, she said, to counter the promotion of terrorist violence and “language intended to incite fear” of religious and ethnic groups.

No one should believe the lie that these powers are aimed at terrorists. As mass movements of the working class against austerity and war spread throughout the world, the ruling class is responding by expanding the definition of terrorism and “extremism” to criminalise left-wing and anti-fascist groups.

Trump’s UN speech, for instance, described “open border activists” as “evil” and supporters of “criminals.” His administration has threatened to label Antifa a terrorist organisation. French President Emanuel Macron’s government, a key supporter of the Christchurch Call, has vilified the “yellow vest” anti-austerity protesters as “extremists.” Germany’s secret service has branded the Socialist Equality Party an “extremist” organisation to justify state surveillance.

India’s Hindu chauvinist BJP government, a signatory of the Call, has blocked all communications in Kashmir, in the name of fighting “extremism.” The Indonesian government responded to recent mass protests by shutting down the internet in its two Papuan provinces.

In New York, Ardern joined Macron, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Jordan's King Abdullah, other government leaders and Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg for a Christchurch Call Leaders' Dialogue. The meeting launched a "crisis response protocol" as part of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), established in 2017 by companies such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Microsoft.

The GIFCT has been expanded, funded by the tech companies, with its own staff and executive director. The crisis protocol will facilitate the sharing of algorithms between major tech companies and smaller firms in order to quickly shut down content. Ardern said this would ensure that videos such as Tarrant's live-streamed video of the Christchurch attack could be removed "to stop the internet being used as a tool for terror."

The potential applications, however, go well beyond this. Significantly, Ardern stressed that the GIFCT's "mission now encompasses violent extremist content online—not just terrorist content." The protocol could be used to shut down viral videos of protests, exposures of police brutality or war crimes, photos of conditions in immigrant concentration camps, and any other oppositional or politically damaging content which is labelled "violent extremist."

Already, in the name of fighting "fake news" and foreign "interference," companies including Google, its subsidiary YouTube, and Facebook, have sought to restrict access to many anti-war, left-wing and socialist sources. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been downgraded in Google search results, while the "authoritative" corporate media has been elevated.

More than six months after the Christchurch terrorist attack, there has still been no explanation of how Tarrant was able to carry out the atrocity, despite his connections with fascist groups and repeated warnings about him and his associates made to police in Australia and New Zealand. A royal commission set up by Ardern to ostensibly investigate the attack is being held in secret. At Ardern's request, the media has agreed to self-censor coverage of Tarrant's statements at his trial next year. The government also has banned his manifesto.

The real circumstances and political roots of the attack are being covered up in order to disarm and lull

the working class, while the lie is being promoted that violence is a product of the internet and too much free speech. This in turn justifies the strengthening of the state apparatus to defend capitalism, which is the real source of war, social inequality, racism and fascism.



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