

Facebook's "depoliticization" aimed at censorship of left-wing and socialist organizations

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The ongoing drive to impose online political censorship of the left has become clearer over the past week following remarks by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg that the social media platform was being "depoliticized."

Speaking during a fourth-quarter earnings call with investors on January 28, Zuckerberg said the company was working on methods to "reduce the amount of political content in News Feed." He said that Facebook was "continuing to fine-tune how this works" and "we plan to keep civic and political groups out of recommendations for the long term and we plan to expand that policy globally."

While individuals, pages and groups have been ostensibly blocked, banned or deleted for violating "community standards" in the past, Zuckerberg said the ongoing efforts to "turn down the temperature and discourage divisive conversation and communities" would include "groups that we may not want to encourage people to join even if they don't violate our policies."

Zuckerberg's remarks were in part a response to a letter he received on January 21 from Democratic Representatives Tom Malinowski of New Jersey and Anna Eshoo of California that blamed Facebook for presenting users with "content most likely to reinforce their existing political biases, especially those rooted in anger, anxiety, and fear," and for using algorithms that "undermine our shared sense of objective reality, intensify fringe political beliefs, facilitate connections between extremist users."

Malinowski and Eshoo praised Facebook's decision before the 2020 elections to stop "recommending that users join political and social issue groups" and

denounced the lifting of these restrictions before the Georgia run-off election, which caused "a spike in partisan political content and a decline in authoritative news sources in users' newsfeeds."

While it may appear that Zuckerberg and the Democrats are responding to the storming of the US Capitol on January 6 by a fascist mob incited by Donald Trump in a coup attempt aimed at overturning the results of the 2020 elections, their choice of words is significant. They do not refer to the far-right, fascists, neo-Nazis, militia groups and others who include in their ranks leading members of the Republican Party, law enforcement officers and active and retired US military representatives.

The reference to "divisive conversation," turning down "the temperature," "fringe political beliefs" and "extremist users," make it clear that the effort to shut down political dialogue on social media is aimed at silencing left-wing and socialist politics and preventing the working class from using Facebook to organize its struggles against the capitalist system.

In comments to *Politico* on January 29, Rep. Malinowski elaborated on his vision of political censorship when he said did not care about how the depoliticization of Facebook would impact political organizing of progressive and left groups on the platform, "as long as these new rules apply to everybody equally." He added, "Access to Facebook for campaigns is a nice thing to have, but it's not necessary for democracy to function. There are a lot of ways to reach voters."

A similar line of argument was advanced by the right-wing *Wall Street Journal* in a major article published on January 31 entitled, "Facebook Knew Calls for

Violence Plagued ‘Groups,’ Now Plans Overhaul.”

After the *Journal* makes the lying claim that the “Capitol riot” was the product of “hyper-partisanship,” the article goes on to say that the proliferation of “extremist groups” on Facebook was to blame. Instead of focusing on a defeated President seeking to overthrow the US constitution by mobilizing a fascist mob against Congress, the *Journal* presents the views of Nina Jankowicz, a social media researcher at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., who wrote that Facebook groups were destroying American democracy.

That the real target of the effort to shut down Facebook groups is the political left comes out when the *Journal* says Facebook conducted an investigation in August 2020 of “US groups tied to mercenary and hyperpartisan entities” using platform tools to build large audiences. “Most of the Groups were on the right end of the political spectrum, but ‘Suburban Housewives Against Trump’ appeared near the top of the charts, too, the August presentation said. Conservative or liberal, the Groups shared a common thread: They had harnessed passionate super-users and Facebook recruitment tools to achieve viral growth.”

Facebook’s reduction of politics in the news feed policy has been identified as a far-reaching attack on democratic rights by free speech advocate Tim Karr, senior director of strategy and communications at the advocacy group Free Press. Karr told *Politico* that Facebook should be able to address concerns about amplification of the far-right without hurting civic-minded groups.

“Facebook has the ability to fix its recommendation algorithm to exclude white supremacist, militia and conspiracy groups still in its midst, and to do it without harming well-intentioned organizations that are using its platform to organize,” Karr said. “This isn’t rocket science.”

It could not be clearer that the entire US ruling establishment is attempting to utilize the events of January 6 as justification for shutting down progressive, left-wing, anti-capitalist and socialist political organizations and publishers on social media platforms such as Facebook. The subsequent shutdown of groups, pages and accounts—including the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan and leading

members of the Socialist Equality Party in the US—by Facebook that began on January 22 is part of this strategy.

Fear of growing opposition in the working class to government policies—especially the response to the COVID-19 pandemic—and against the rise of the fascist right is a critical aspect of the plans to shut down political discussion on social media and block algorithms from promoting left and socialist groups in the news feed of users.

Workers and young people must demand that socialist groups and political discussion about the threat of fascist dictatorship on social media be defended. No confidence can be placed in the Democratic Party to do anything about the danger to democratic rights represented by the January 6 attempted coup by Donald Trump and his supporters in the Republican Party.

The way to defeat the far right is not by shutting down political dialogue online but by utilizing these tools as instruments in the struggle to educate and organize the international working class in the struggle against the capitalist system—the source of the fascist menace—and for socialism on a world scale.



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