Facebook news ban continues in Australia

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Facebook is continuing a ban on sharing and accessing news content in Australia, introduced by the social media company yesterday as part of a conflict with the Australian government and the country's largest media conglomerates.

The ban is having a substantial impact. According to polling late last year, more than 50 percent of Australian residents access the news through social media, primarily Facebook. Overnight, they have been cut off from their main source of information, and the forum in which they discuss political developments.

The blockade is also hitting a far broader range of publishers and organisations than the handful of massive media companies locked in dispute with Facebook. Links from the *World Socialist Web Site* and many other alternative publications cannot be posted or viewed by Australian residents. The Facebook pages of a number of trade unions and political organisations have been stripped of most of their content, including the Socialist Equality Party.

The pages of several welfare organisations and government agencies were initially caught up in the algorithm. This meant that information from the Bureau of Meteorology on fire and flooding hazards was inaccessible on Facebook for part of yesterday, while domestic violence support groups and other assistance organisations also reported outages.

The Australian government and the media conglomerates have sought to capitalise on the more egregious consequences of the ban, with senior politicians and media executives condemning Facebook for its "socially-irresponsible" behaviour and declaring that the company has "lost its credibility."

This posture of moral outrage is a sham. Its purpose is to obscure the real origins of the news ban and to dress-up the mercenary calculations of the media corporations, backed by the government, as a defence of press freedom and freedom of speech.

In reality, Facebook's actions are only the latest shot in a war between the social media companies and the largest news conglomerates over control of lucrative advertising revenue streams. The millions of people affected by the ban, and the host of organisations whose content has been blocked, are the collateral damage of an internecine conflict within the corporate and financial elite.

The immediate trigger for the ban was the passage on Wednesday of a media bargaining code by the House of Representatives, the lower house of the Australian parliament. Supported by virtually the entire political establishment, including the conservative Liberal-National government, the Labor Party opposition and the Greens, the code was set to be ratified by the Senate and to become law.

There is nothing remotely progressive about the legislation, which was drawn up in consultation with the companies that would be its primary beneficiaries, including News Corp, Rupert Murdoch's media empire, and some of the country's other largest publishing entities, such as Nine Entertainment Corporation and Seven West Media.

Its proponents have cynically sought to present the code as an attempt to wrest power away from the social media monopolies and return it to civil society. They have spoken in vague terms about ensuring "media diversity," even though Australia's news industry is among the most concentrated in the world, and the code will benefit only the largest media organisations that already dominate the market.

All of this is aimed at covering-up the real purpose of the code. It is essentially a cash grab by a handful of media corporations, seeking to shake down Facebook with the support of the government and the official political parties, and backed by the force of legislation.

The code is based on an extremely dubious premise. This claims that Facebook and Google benefit greatly

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from the privilege of indexing the articles of the major news companies in their search results, and allowing their users to share them. No serious attempt has been made to explain why the content of news corporations is uniquely rewarding to the social media companies, as against everything else that is posted on their platforms.

Despite this, the code would compel the social media companies to establish revenue-sharing deals with select "registered news business corporations," approved by the federal authorities, and with an annual revenue of at least $150,000.

The measure is driven by concerns that the media conglomerates, which function as an integral component of the political establishment, are being hit by declining newspaper sales which has cut their advertising revenue—once called rivers of gold—and the turn by growing sections of the population to alternative news sources, with the expansion of the internet and an increasing recognition that the corporate media functions as a mouthpiece of governments and big business.

Two developments this week have demonstrated what the media companies are seeking to achieve.

Firstly, Seven West Media signed a deal with Google, providing it with $30 million a year of the social media company's advertising revenue. Seven West's content will be featured in Google's "News Showcase," a heavily-curated feed that will primarily promote articles from the largest media entities. News Corp followed suit yesterday, announcing that it had also reached an agreement with Google.

Secondly, in their response to the ban, the media companies and the government have focused their opposition on warnings that it will result in a greater spread of "unverified" and "fake news," catch-all terms for any content that does not align with the assertions of governments, the intelligence agencies and the corporate elite.

The aim of the media companies, in other words, is to become further entrenched as an "official" source of news, and to boost their coffers with a cash grab.

That this has nothing to do with press freedom is demonstrated by the fact that the media companies have largely supported the attacks on democratic rights instituted by successive governments, from the sweeping expansion of police powers under the bogus "war on terror," to a McCarthyite campaign against Chinese "foreign interference," aimed at legitimising an aggressive US-led confrontation with Beijing and cracking down on anti-war dissent.

The attitude of the media conglomerates to press freedom is exemplified by their silence over the plight of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, or their open support for the government attempts to destroy him for revealing war crimes.

For its part, the Australian government, acting on precedents established by earlier Labor and Liberal-National administrations, has sharply escalated attacks on press freedom. It has overseen police raids against journalists, for exposing war crimes in Afghanistan and plans for expanded mass surveillance of the population, and has threatened to prosecute them for publishing activities.

All of this underscores the fact that the working class, and genuine defenders of democratic rights, must take an independent position.

They should reject the claim that the measures are somehow aimed at ensuring the financing of journalism. The major media conglomerates, as well as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, at government direction, have been slashing journalists' jobs for years.

And Facebook's actions have revealed in the most graphic way possible the incompatibility of the right to freedom of speech and information with the private ownership of the means of its dissemination. They can be cut off at the flick of a switch in the interests of the corporate owners.

Millions of people are shocked and opposed to Facebook's news ban, but the defence of freedom of information online cannot be taken forward in league with its bitter opponents, including the government and the media conglomerates.

It requires a movement of the working class fighting for socialism, including the transfer of all of the social media companies and the media giants to public ownership under democratic control.

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