

Workers and youth speak out against Facebook's Australian news ban and corporate media cash grab

Our reporters
22 February 2021

Last Thursday, Facebook instituted a ban on the posting and sharing of all news articles by its users in Australia. Overnight, millions of people have been cut off from their primary source of accessing and discussing news and political developments. A range of organisations and publishers, including the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), have been hit by the indefinite blockade.

Facebook's actions are the latest shot in a war between the social media companies and major news conglomerates, over control of massive online advertising revenue streams.

The immediate trigger for the ban was the passage through the Australian parliament's House of Representatives of a new media code. Supported by the Liberal-National Coalition government, Labor and the Greens, the code would compel Facebook and Google to hand hundreds of millions of dollars to the largest media conglomerates, for no clear reason.

In other words, the code is a cash grab, aimed at boosting the profits of media corporations, under conditions in which declining paper sales have hit their advertising revenue and their position as information "gatekeepers" has been undermined by the expansion of the internet.

The WSWS has insisted on the need for workers and defenders of civil liberties to take an independent position, which opposes both the indiscriminate and anti-democratic measure of Facebook and the attempts to entrench the corporate news publications. The dispute has underscored the need for a socialist perspective, aimed at transforming the social media companies and the news conglomerates into public utilities controlled by working people.

The WSWS has spoken to a number of workers and young people on the issues raised by the ban, and the stance that must be taken in response to it.

Jack, a student from Warrnambool, a regional town in Victoria's southwest, said that "The indefinite ban of all news content on Facebook has direct implications for the millions of people in Australia who access news via the platform. The rights of freedom of information online and democratic values are outright assaulted by the ban.

"The action of Facebook, however, was not an arbitrary one but a direct response to the Australian government's latest news media bargaining code that would necessitate social media companies sharing ad revenue with the dominant Australian news conglomerates.

"We must recognise that this is the latest episode in the conflict between Australian media conglomerates and the social media monopolies. It is members of the capitalist class exchanging blows. This clash is not in the interests of the working class majority but the bottom line of these two sections of big business. The so-called 'outrage' by the media conglomerates and the Australian federal government is not over the attack on the rights of ordinary people."

George, who has been in the media industry for many years, stated: "As a worker living in Australia, I am disgusted, but not surprised by Facebook's banning me indefinitely from accessing all news media in the world. In effect, I am being held hostage by the social media giant in its dispute with the Australian financial elite: a fight in which I have nothing to gain. Both sides are seeking to undermine the freedom of information online.

“There is nothing progressive about the government’s shakedown of Google and Facebook. Carried out at the behest of the major Australian corporate media organisations, it seeks to boost their profits and restore their dominance at the expense of independent voices including the WSWS. Their true attitude to freedom of the press is shown by their silence over the treatment of fellow journalist Julian Assange.

“For its part, Facebook, like every other corporation, is motivated solely by the drive to accumulate profit on behalf of its shareholders. The news ban underscores the dangers of the control of information and its dissemination being in the hands of massive corporations that are accountable only to their ultra-wealthy shareholders, both on Facebook’s side and the side of the media conglomerates.

“These events prove once again that technology can only help society move forward if it is in the hands of the working class.”

Brenton, a psychology student in Melbourne, explained: “We don’t seek to defend the interests of the corporate media establishment, but the interests of the workers. Our right to access, share and freely discuss historic and contemporary developments has been attacked and curtailed by this measure which has the effect of preventing ordinary people from being exposed to a breadth of information from which they can make up their own minds! There can be no democracy without a highly informed and conscious working class!”

Rick, a retired teacher, stated: “The internet means information can be free to anyone who needs or wants it. Instead, under Capitalism, online news is artificially rationed, sold at a premium to those who can afford it, or distributed in return for the collection of intrusive personal information used by corporations to target obnoxious advertising and governments for surveillance and propaganda.

“The creation and distribution of news is controlled by a few corporations, ruthless in promoting their class interests.

“The stark alternatives are a socialist system that would support democratic and free creation and distribution of information, or the increasingly authoritarian control that we have now.”

Eileen, a worker in Western Australia, responded:

“We always knew, even before social media appeared, that all the other corporate-owned media outlets were propaganda mouthpieces, but we hoped that the internet would shatter corporate control of ideas and information. However, while capitalistic decision-making is in control of technology, there is no way that social media can escape their control. We no longer have a ‘voice,’ in our print media, in commercial television channels and now via the internet.

“We’ve already seen this sweeping censorship and control appearing on the political scene in Australia. Our politicians aren’t concerned with defending free speech or democracy, only about supporting their ‘mates’ in the corporate media.

“This is a wake-up call. Facebook is Australia’s most widely-used social networking platform and has banned Australian users from accessing or sharing any news content, and deleted all news outlet content, thereby restricting our ability to share alternative comment on society. All that seems to be left, if we want to defend our right to communicate freely, is to do it ourselves.”



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