

Montana bans TikTok: Anti-China hysteria and the attack on democratic rights

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In a major new milestone in the bipartisan effort to censor the internet and undermine freedom of speech in America, the state of Montana signed into law a ban on the distribution of the TikTok social media app Wednesday.

The law is completely antithetical to the First Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the “prior restraint” of speech. But while the bill is unconstitutional, it is enforceable due to the monopoly exercised by Apple and Google on the market for mobile phone applications. In particular, Apple’s iOS mobile operating system, which controls almost 60 percent of the US market, does not allow users to load any apps that are not available on the official Apple App Store.

TikTok is the world’s sixth largest social network. Its short video format is overwhelmingly popular with younger people, and it has spawned imitators among every US-based social media network.

While TikTok will remain accessible in Montana as a website, its most important content-creation features, allowing users to quickly make creative and accessible short videos, will be blocked.

Beyond the immediate impact, the Montana law sets the pseudo-legal precedent by which companies can be forced by the US government to carry out mass censorship. While the Montana law targets a specific company on the grounds that it is owned by foreign nationals, the same companies—Apple and Google—tasked with enforcing the ban on their app stores can, by the same regime, be fined or prosecuted for allowing users to access oppositional political web sites on their Safari and Chrome web browsers.

At the same time, the TikTok ban is part of an escalating campaign of anti-Chinese xenophobia aimed at fueling the war drive of US imperialism in the Asia

Pacific. It is part of a series of laws and actions ever more openly targeting Chinese nationals, including bills in Texas, Alabama and Florida that would ban Chinese citizens from buying land in those states.

In justifying the ban, Montana’s Republican governor, Greg Gianforte, claimed that it was necessary to “protect Montanans’ personal and private data from the Chinese Communist Party.”

Gianforte wrote, “One of government’s chief responsibilities is to keep its citizens—and their personal, private, sensitive information and data—safe and secure. Foreign adversaries’ collection and use of Montanans’ personal information and data from social media applications infringe on Montanans’ constitutionally guaranteed individual right to privacy.”

The claims that the Chinese government is gathering data through TikTok are entirely unsubstantiated, rooted in pure ignorance and baseless accusations. What is alleged, nevertheless, pales in comparison to what US companies and the US government have been proven to be doing on a daily basis with the private information of American citizens.

The giant technology companies, closely connected to the state, collect vast amounts of information on a daily basis, with hardly any controls or regulations over how they use it.

In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed that the US government operates the world’s largest illegal domestic surveillance program, digitally copying, analyzing and storing private communications of individuals throughout the world, including US citizens. The US National Security Agency’s explicit goal is “total information awareness,” to “collect it all, know it all, process it all, exploit it all.”

In 2017, the Democratic Party, with support from broad sections of the Republican Party, initiated a

campaign to demand that social media companies censor the internet, based on false accusations of Russian “meddling in the 2016 election.” In response to this campaign, Google carried out a change to its search algorithm designed to suppress “alternative viewpoints,” leading the search traffic of left-wing, anti-war, and socialist web sites to plunge.

While the TikTok ban in Montana has been spearheaded by Republicans, it is fully in keeping with the policies of the Democratic Biden administration.

At a March congressional hearing, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was asked by Congressman Ken Buck whether TikTok posed “a threat to United States security,” to which Blinken replied in the affirmative. Buck added, “Shouldn’t a threat to US security be banned?” To this, Blinken replied, “It should be ended one way or another.” That same month, the Biden administration officially called for a ban on TikTok unless its parent company, Bytedance, sold TikTok to a US company.

The moves to ban TikTok and undermine the First Amendment right to free speech have proceeded in conjunction with the escalation of the war drive against China.

The Trump administration’s 2018 National Security Strategy, which proclaimed the doctrine of “great power conflict,” asserted that the US competition with China required “the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power—diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement and military.” As part of this policy, Trump sought, without success, to ban TikTok.

The Biden administration embraced this doctrine in its 2022 National Security Strategy, calling for “the seamless combination of capabilities,” integrating the “economic, technological, and information... domains.”

This totalitarian integration of “law enforcement and military” and the information sphere forms the framework of the US effort to ban TikTok. All aspects of social and economic life are to be brought under state control in the name of “great-power competition.”

In reality, however, the main target of the censorship regime is not China, but domestic opposition within the population, in particular, efforts by the working class to fight against exploitation and poverty wages.

The bipartisan campaign to ban TikTok, stretching from the governors’ mansions staffed by fascist

demagogues, all the way to the White House, demonstrates that there exists no constituency for the defense of the most basic democratic rights within the US political establishment.

The effort to ban TikTok must be opposed by all class-conscious working people as an assault on their fundamental right to freedom of speech. As workers enter into struggle against poverty wages and workplace exploitation, they must take up the demand to defend freedom of expression and oppose US plans for war with Russia and China.



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