

US anti-TikTok bill: Escalating online censorship and preparing for war with China

Niles Niemuth
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The 352-65 vote by the US House of Representatives this week to ban or force the sale of the popular social media app TikTok by its Beijing-based owner ByteDance is an attack on the democratic rights of the American people, particularly the more than 170 million people, mainly young, who make regular use of this application.

It is an escalation of the longstanding campaign to censor left-wing and oppositional viewpoints on the internet while whipping up anti-China sentiment to escalate trade war measures against Beijing and prepare the population for open war with the world's second-largest economy.

President Joe Biden gave the green light for the overwhelming bipartisan passage of the right-wing, authoritarian bill in the nearly evenly split Republican-controlled House when he declared last week that he would sign the ban if it was approved by Congress. It must now be approved by a vote in the Democratic-controlled Senate—a prospect that remains uncertain with the bill's current language—before heading to the president's desk.

US politicians routinely declare TikTok to be a threat to “national security,” claiming the app's algorithm and use of artificial intelligence are employed to collect information on and manipulate American citizens to the benefit of Beijing. These accusations are nothing more than confessions, as this is exactly what big US corporations are already doing, scooping up and selling internet users' data. And it has long been established that the US government is illegally spying on the entire world's population.

The renewed effort to effectively kill the app, either through its purchase by a US-based outfit or a de facto ban through massive punitive fines, has developed amid the growth of the app as the most popular

platform among young Americans to get their news and share their views. The app has 170 million active monthly users in the US, with nearly half of users between the ages of 18 and 34. While users post and view content on a vast array of subjects, videos critical of US foreign policy routinely go viral.

Since Israel launched its genocidal campaign with the full backing of the US against Gaza in October last year, hundreds of millions in the US and around the world have watched videos on the app that expose the horrific reality for the Palestinians on the ground and cut through Zionist propaganda.

The head of the Zionist Anti-Defamation League, Jonathan Greenblatt, who was caught on a leaked audio calling this the “TikTok problem,” has backed banning the app on the grounds that it facilitates the spread of “antisemitism”—a slander that is hurled against all those opposing the genocide in Gaza.

A TikTok ban was first attempted under President Donald Trump in 2020 as part of his trade war measures against China. An executive order he signed prohibiting downloads of the app on Apple and Android devices was ultimately blocked by a federal judge for violation of the Constitution's First and Fifth Amendment rights to free speech and due process. The current bill backed by Biden is as far-reaching as Trump's attack.

The intervening years have seen an institutionalization of censorship on social media and efforts to capture and kill platforms that were once open for free political discourse and were used to organize oppositional movements. Users of social media platforms have found that certain words or phrases, such as “Gaza” or “genocide,” will get their posts flagged and suppressed.

Meta's platforms Facebook and Instagram have been

turned into wastelands under congressional pressure over supposed concerns about the safety of children and teens. The fascist billionaire Elon Musk purchased Twitter in 2022. The app, which was key for those organizing the 2011 Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and for those following these events, has been turned into X, a platform where the filthiest antisemitism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and anti-LGBTQ content is regularly boosted by its owner.

Since 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* has been banned from the largest discussion boards on Reddit, which is being increasingly sanitized and commercialized as it moves toward becoming a publicly traded corporation. Meanwhile, Google continues to manipulate its search algorithm to suppress results for the WSWS and other left-wing sites.

On Thursday, YouTube politically censored the *World Socialist Web Site* by flagging as “age-restricted” a video of the lecture given by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North at the University of Michigan on March 12, titled, “The Gaza genocide and the death of Aaron Bushnell: What are the political lessons?”

Among those salivating at the prospect of snapping up TikTok is Trump’s former treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin—an instigator of the campaign against the company—who announced on CNBC Thursday that he has put together a group to buy the billion-dollar operation. Similarly, the right-wing video hosting service Rumble, which hosts Trump’s Truth Social, announced interest in buying TikTok. The anti-democratic trajectory of the app under such ownership is clear.

Censorship of the internet is seen as a key part of the preparations by the American ruling class for great power conflict, most openly against China and Russia, that is, preparations for World War III. The Biden administration has based itself on the national security strategy outlined by the Pentagon under Trump in 2018, which declared “long-term strategic competition requires the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power—diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military.”

This has meant ever more aggressive trade war measures on supposed national security grounds, from the current effort against TikTok to the banning of the use of China-based Huawei equipment by 5G networks.

This is being extended to demand a ban on the import of electric vehicles and batteries from China and the paranoiac hysteria that Chinese-built shipping cranes are spying on Americans.

The social media platforms which have been developed over the last two decades have proven to be critical instruments in the hands of the working class, which is what strikes fear in the ruling class and motivates the growing censorship regime. Workers and young people must oppose the growing censorship campaign online, which is aimed above all at closing off the avenues available to find oppositional content and mobilize against capitalist exploitation and war. And they must mobilize against the campaign to whip up an anti-China hysteria aimed at setting the stage for open warfare between nuclear armed powers, which would be devastating for billions around the world.



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