

New Zealand government seeks to ban social media for under-16s

Tom Peters
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New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon announced last week that his government will prepare legislation to ban under-16-year-olds from using social media.

The right-wing National Party-led coalition government will model the ban on a similar law passed last December by the Australian Labor government, amid widespread opposition. It remains unclear how the Australian law—the first such restriction to be enacted in an ostensibly democratic country—will be implemented.

Luxon and other politicians and media pundits have spent the past fortnight professing concern for the mental health and safety of young people. The prime minister told a media conference on May 11 that “restricting access for under-16s would help protect our kids from bullying, harmful content and social media addiction.”

He noted that, as well as Australia, “the United Kingdom, the EU, Canada and states in the US are also exploring the issue.”

These governments are not remotely interested in the wellbeing of children. They are all backing the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, which has killed tens of thousands of children, while imposing brutal austerity measures against the working class.

The calls to restrict teenagers’ access to social media are driven by fear in ruling circles that young people are becoming politicised and are moving to the left in response to the breakdown of capitalism. Above all, governments are determined to prevent youth from accessing a socialist analysis of the crisis they confront, especially the articles published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is suppressed by the corporate media.

Restricting access to social media is one of several repressive laws being prepared to deal with rising

opposition in the working class. In New Zealand, these include new anti-strike laws and a bill that will enable the state to criminalise political opposition or anti-war activism by labelling it “foreign interference.”

Luxon blamed social media for harming children, but he presented no actual evidence for this. The government’s austerity regime, on the other hand, including deep cuts to health and education, has undoubtedly contributed to the severe mental health crisis facing young people.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported last week that Health NZ has a shortage of 1,500 mental health workers and that “demand for psychiatry services has increased by almost three-quarters over the past decade.”

Children are among those worst affected by the social crisis. Funding for school lunch programs has been slashed, leading to smaller and less nutritious meals for hundreds of thousands of children. About 1 in 5 children lives in poverty and one tenth of the population is regularly relying on food banks.

School leavers face a bleak future, with 12.9 percent of people under 24-years-old not in education, training or work. This is the result of deliberate policies aimed at driving down wages and increasing the exploitation of workers.

Sections of the media are now calling for unemployed youth to be conscripted into the military, as part of the government’s multi-billion dollar boost to military spending to prepare the country to join US-led wars against China, Russia and elsewhere.

There is growing anti-capitalist and anti-war sentiment among young people. A survey last year found that 71 percent of 18 to 34-year-olds in New Zealand agreed that the country’s economy was “rigged to advantage the rich and powerful.”

Large numbers of youth have joined rallies opposing the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and the support of the New Zealand ruling elite for this historic crime. Demonstrations have been organised through social media, amid a blackout by the corporate media.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of school students have walked out of class to protest against government inaction on climate change. The school strikes were also organised largely through social media. These are the sorts of actions the government wants to shut down.

To give the appearance of public support for banning under-16s from social media, a high-powered lobby group called B416 has been formed. It submitted a petition to parliament saying that the policy is necessary “to protect children from harmful and misleading online content.”

Luxon thanked B416, referring to it as a group of “concerned parents and parenting experts.”

In fact, B416’s core leadership includes Xero accounting software director Anna Curzon, investment banker Cecilia Robinson, financial consultant Blair Knight and Zuru toy company co-founder Anna Mowbray. The Mowbrays are one of New Zealand’s richest families and prominent donors to the National Party.

These corporate elites are absurdly posturing as opponents of tech giants making profits by getting children addicted to their platforms.

One does not need to support companies like Meta and X—which are promoting far-right conspiracies while actively censoring anti-war and socialist content, including the WSWS—to recognise that a ban on teenagers will be a major attack on free speech.

The proposed social media ban will not only affect under-16s. The NZ and Australian governments have not explained how age-based restrictions will be enforced, but it will almost certainly require the collection of information about existing social media users—a major invasion of privacy and expansion of state surveillance.

There are divisions in the coalition government about the ban, but these are of a tactical, not principled character. The far-right ACT Party said the present proposal would not be workable, but its leader David Seymour told Radio NZ that social media was “messing with kids’ brains” and something must be

done. He said there should be an inquiry before any policies are drawn up.

Luxon has made clear that he will seek support from the opposition Labour Party if necessary. Labour leader Chris Hipkins said he was “open” to working with the government to pass the bill.

The last Labour Party-led government exploited the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, in which the fascist Brenton Tarrant massacred 51 people, to vastly expand the powers of the Office of the Chief Censor, enabling it to more easily remove content on online platforms that the state declared to be violent or extremist.

Then prime minister Jacinda Ardern also launched the Christchurch Call to Action, in collaboration with France, the US and other right-wing governments and tech companies, to promote mechanisms to censor the internet on a global scale.

None of this had anything to do with countering the far-right. What counts as “violent extremist content” is determined by the same governments that have smeared protests against the Israeli genocide as antisemitic and are emboldening extreme right-wing forces. Donald Trump’s fascist administration is imprisoning and deporting pro-Palestine protesters and immigrants based on fraudulent allegations of supporting terrorism.

The drive towards authoritarian rule is inseparable from the assault on workers’ living standards and the militarisation of society. It cannot be opposed by appealing to Labour or any other capitalist party. Democratic rights can only be defended by the working class, armed with a socialist political program to put an end to capitalism—the root cause of inequality, fascism and imperialist war.



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