

Australian high school students oppose social media ban

Robert Bond
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On December 10, the Australian Labor government brought into effect a world-first law banning teenagers under 16 from using social media. Framed as a “child safety” measure, the real purpose of the ban is to curb the growing political awareness of young people and provide the basis for wider surveillance of social media activity.

No matter how old social media users in Australia are, the ban requires them to verify their age before using a host of popular platforms including Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube. This is done by the platforms, all controlled by social media conglomerates, using government digital IDs, biometric checks or invasive metadata analysis to infer age.

Independent experts and youth organisations have warned since the ban was first tabled in November 2024 that such measures would cut young people off from support networks and be used to expand state power over the internet.

Similar measures are being developed by the Trump administration in the US and in European countries, often citing the lead taken by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government. This is part of a broader attack by governments internationally against basic democratic rights.

In Australia, federal and state Labor governments are also enacting laws to outlaw opposition to the Gaza genocide carried out by Israel and backed by the imperialist powers, including the Australian government.

Led by Albanese and New South Wales (NSW) Premier Chris Minns, governments in Australia have seized upon the reactionary terrorist shooting at Bondi Beach in Sydney on December 14 to introduce sweeping laws banning supposed “hate speech,” targeting not only events and slogans denouncing

Israel’s crimes but other expressions of political dissent.

Large numbers of young people use social media to learn about the world around them, including the Gaza genocide, and discuss alternatives to the status quo. The ban is a political move to stop youth radicalisation around war, austerity and climate collapse.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Australia have called on youth to oppose the ban by organising protests, school walkouts and discussions with workers to support them.

The IYSSE in Newcastle, an industrial city two hours north of Sydney, spoke with high school students about the ban. As they explained, social media can play an even more significant role for youth in regional areas to connect with each other and learn about the world.

Brave, a 16-year-old student, said: “I would say [the ban] would definitely cut me off from a lot of social groups, which is one of the main reasons why I’ve got social media.

“I feel like it follows the age-old thing of, we need to ‘protect the children,’ but it’s just for more surveillance.”

An IYSSE member asked Brave why the ban would target under-16s. He replied: “Well, because they’re usually some of the most radical or biggest in movements. Because you look throughout history, and it’s always the students who are rising up.

“Young people never really had a voice before social media, because they couldn’t do the news or write papers and stuff. So this newfound voice is intimidating.”

Brave also noted that many young people are finding ways of getting around the ban. “Anyone who would be affected has just worked around it really,” he said.

Asked what he thought about joining a campaign to oppose the ban, Brave said: “I’ve already signed a couple of petitions, and I do enjoy using my right to protest, I’d probably go to protests.”

One **student**, who wished to remain anonymous, noted some negative impacts of social media on young people, including exposure to adult material and bullying, but still opposed the ban.

“I consider it a way of mass censorship from the government,” the student said. “With access to social media, adolescents are able to educate themselves and others about what is going on around the world and the atrocities being committed and push themselves to be global citizens through the medium of social media.

“With access to an account they can advocate for others but also just engage with media in a positive way. Whether that’s watching entertainment or cooking videos, it’s all part of the positives of social media.”

Another anonymous **student** contrasted the official justification for the ban to the intensifying cost-of-living crisis which is being driven by government austerity measures. “I mean, they said that it was to ‘let kids be kids,’ but if it was to let kids be kids, then I wouldn’t have gotten a job at 14. I wouldn’t have done all of this stuff at a really young age.”

She added: “My brother, the minute he turned 14, was looking for jobs. We need money in society.”

The student noted that some under-16s she knows are still using social media apps despite the ban. “We were all planning on going off social media completely because we didn’t want to give our IDs. But then when the day came, we didn’t get anything [to stop us using the services].”

Vance, who lives in Maitland, 40 minutes northwest of Newcastle, and finished Year 9 this year, commented: “I normally use social media as a way to communicate with my friends, online friends, people I’ve known for years, because we can’t speak in person anymore, as they’ve moved away.

“The ban was a big problem because I had to go through and find each friend’s phone number, and it’s a bit hard because I don’t normally have credit, or they don’t normally have credit...

“They said it was for mental health and keeping young people off the internet. But the problem is, a lot of children these days, their support systems are on the

internet due to just not being able to be accepted where they are.

“Back in 2023, I was super depressed because I was getting bullied, and my support system was this little friend group I had on social media, and they were helping me keep going. And if the ban had happened back when I was still depressed, I would have gone really bad. So I feel like a lot of support systems are being taken down.”

Asked why the government was implementing the ban, Vance said: “I personally think it’s because they want to silence voices. Because young people on social media have started pointing out issues.”



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