France’s social media ban imposes universal identity checks on the entire population

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On July 21, the French parliament gave final approval to a sweeping, reactionary law banning children under 15 from major social media platforms and extending the existing school cellphone ban to high schools. The Senate approved the text 243-2 that morning; the National Assembly passed it 279-81 that evening, with 66 abstentions. Hailed by President Emmanuel Macron as a defense of children, it is an authoritarian measure requiring every internet user in France to prove their age, and therefore their identity, to access social networks.

Under European Union procedure, France cannot promulgate it before August 10; deputies from La France Insoumise (LFI) and the Socialist Party (PS) have referred it to the Constitutional Council, which has a month to rule. Whatever the Council decides, the political meaning of the vote is unmistakable. In a bogus pretext of safeguarding youth, the European bourgeoisie is on an offensive to abolish online anonymity, erect Internet censorship, and tie every digital footprint to a state-verified physical identity.

Its target is the growing political radicalization of workers and youth internationally. Macron, widely despised as the “president of the rich,” is in the final months of a decade-long presidency. Amid skyrocketing living costs, deepening social inequality, and escalating war with Russia, his government is seizing on parents’ concerns over their children’s wellbeing to build the infrastructure of a total Internet surveillance.

The fraud of youth protection

Over the past decade, teen suicides, depression, self-harm, and eating disorders have surged globally. French families have launched lawsuits against TikTok over teen suicides. Gaëlle Berbonde, a mother in the Paris region who campaigned for the bill, told the Associated Press that her daughter, who received her first smartphone in seventh grade, developed anorexia and depression within months and spent 18 months in hospital.

In January the national health and safety agency ANSES, whose opinion the bill’s rapporteur repeatedly cited, found that one in two adolescents spends two to five hours a day on a smartphone and asserted a link between social media exposure and damage to adolescent health.

Macron declared in a video posted to his own social media accounts on January 26 that the brains of French children were “not for sale,” neither to US nor to Chinese platforms. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told a Brussels press conference on July 12 that “social media is not a toy.”

This is a grotesque political fraud. Over the past decade, the Macron government and its European counterparts systematically slashed social spending, increased precarious work, botched the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and supported Israel’s genocide in Gaza and war with Russia in Ukraine. They have enormously exacerbated the social tensions and police-state violence facing society. Three years ago, a massive police crackdown was underway against nationwide youth protests against the blatant, unprovoked police murder of a French youth, Nahel Merzouk.

What alarms capitalist governments is not youth suffering or anguish, but growing youth opposition to their policies of war, austerity and dictatorship. The Gaza genocide, broadcast in real time on social media, politicized a generation. Footage of bombed hospitals and decimated schools exposed the lies of the Western governments that armed the slaughter. Masses of youth held protests and school strikes against war crimes they saw on their phone screens. It is such exposures of state criminality that the social media ban is designed to prevent.

Bans seek to end online anonymity

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The mechanism of the French law is thoroughly reactionary. Beginning September 1, children under 15 will be barred from opening new accounts. From January 1, 2027, social media corporations must identify and suspend all existing underage accounts, forcing every user in France to prove they are over 15 to access social networks.

There is no method of verifying the age of children online without verifying everyone's age and thus identity. Indeed, in the final text agreed by the joint committee, following a negative opinion issued by the European Commission on July 6, lawmakers stripped out the provisions requiring platforms to submit age-verification systems to Arcom, the audiovisual and digital regulator, for approval.

The prohibition remains, however. The French state has simply pushed the machinery of enforcement upward, onto the European Union's Digital Services Act and the age-verification framework that the European Commission is pressing member states to adopt before the end of the year.

Users may be required to upload passports, driver's licenses or national identity documents to state-approved third parties such as France Identité or Docaposte. They may be subjected to biometric facial-age estimation, using tools from firms such as Yoti, already employed by Meta and TikTok, that analyze a user's selfie in real time. Or age may be certified through the European digital identity wallet, using cryptographic "zero-knowledge proofs" that confirm an age band without disclosing a name to the platform.

The Commission's expert panel, conscious of opposition to biometric scanning, recommended this route. However, it changes nothing essential: the credential must still be issued against government identity records, and the state retains the register.

Maya Thomas, an official at the British civil liberties organization Big Brother Watch, told CBS News that requiring users to upload sensitive identity or biometric information does not keep children safe, but introduces "serious cybersecurity and privacy risks for all users of all ages."

In an era of explosive class struggle and growing opposition to war, the capitalist state views online anonymity as a mortal threat. It seeks to tie every social media post, every political critique and every effort at working-class organization to a state-verified physical identity. The policing of circumvention is already escalating into an assault on privacy tools. Regulators in France, Britain and Australia are moving to bring virtual private networks (VPNs) under the same regime.

The surveillance offensive targeting the Internet in France is part of a global attack on democratic rights. The governments of the United States, the European Union, Britain and Australia are moving together to abolish online anonymity and impose universal digital identification, from the Kids Online Safety Act in Washington to the EU's "Chat Control" regulation.

Australia's under-16 ban, in force since December 10, has been an unmitigated failure on its own terms. A peer-reviewed British Medical Journal evaluation in June found substantial circumvention, and regulators found 70 percent of children with accounts still active. On June 27 the Albanese government responded by doubling the maximum penalty for platforms to A$99 million, about US$68 million.

The French ban, introduced by Renaissance deputy Laure Miller, passed with the support of virtually the entire French political establishment. The 279 votes came from Macron's own bloc, the Republican right, Horizons and the Democrats, but also from 19 Greens, six Communists and 30 Socialists. The Socialist deputies, having split, then joined LFI in referring the law to the Constitutional Council. The neo-fascist Rassemblement National, which voted for the measure in January, abstained while posturing as a defender of online anonymity, allowing the text through.

LFI was alone in voting against, after its motion to reject the bill was defeated. It warned that the law would end anonymity online, and that the ban's constitutionality was doubtful. But LFI's opposition remains confined within bourgeois constitutionalism and so it is entirely impotent. It appeals to the capitalist Constitutional Council, which has a long record of passing anti-democratic measures, such as Macron's overwhelmingly unpopular 2023 pension cuts—which Macron imposed by decree, in the face of mass strikes, and without even a parliamentary vote.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste and the *World Socialist Web Site* oppose this law, censorship and police state surveillance. The defense of internet freedom is a class question. The only social force capable of carrying it out is the international working class, which must fight for the expropriation of the technology monopolies and their transformation into public utilities under workers' control.

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