Bipartisan push to ban teens from social media in New Zealand

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In August, the New Zealand's National Party-led government introduced a bill that would restrict people under 16 years old from accessing social media. While the bill has not yet had its first reading, it is likely to pass under the next government.

A new government has yet to be formed following an inconclusive election result on November 7. Both major parties, however, National and Labour, are in favour of the proposed ban.

Using child safety as a pretext, the bill in fact represents an attack on privacy and freedom of information. According to a government media release, the bill would require "high risk social media platforms—like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook—to take reasonable steps to check users are over the ages of 16 using a number of methods including: using existing account information, facial age estimation, and formal ID."

This alone is alarming, as allowing social media platforms access to such information opens the floodgates for breaches of user privacy. The government intends to go further, however, by establishing "an online safety regulator within the Department of Internal Affairs to independently monitor compliance, investigate platforms and enforce the law." This means increasing state surveillance of social media users, with the aim of eliminating online anonymity.

The bill threatens that social media companies that fail to comply with the ban will be fined up to 10 percent of global revenue—potentially tens of billions of dollars for a company like Meta/Facebook.

The bill follows similar legislation in Australia and plans by the European Union to restrict social media access for under-15-year-olds. None of this has anything to do with protecting children. All the capitalist governments, including the National-led government in New Zealand, have supported Israel's genocide in Gaza, which has killed tens of thousands of children.

In New Zealand, successive Labour and National governments have presided over increasing numbers of children living in "material hardship." The current government has also kicked thousands of unemployed teenagers off welfare benefits—a change supported by Labour.

The real concern of the ruling class is that young people are using social media to access news and analysis—including socialist views—outside the control of the corporate and state-owned media, and to organise opposition to war, social inequality and fascism.

In New Zealand, protests against the Gaza genocide, which have been blacked out by the media, have been organised largely through social media. In NZ and internationally, young people have also used social media to organise protests against government inaction on climate change.

In Germany, high school students are using online platforms to organise protests against conscription. In France, nationwide protests by young people against austerity and the far-right have prompted some politicians to demand that social media be blocked for teenagers.

In New Zealand, both Labour and National are promising to slash spending on public services and divert more money to the military to integrate New Zealand into US-led wars and war plans. To enforce these policies, the state must censor anti-war and socialist views online, while boosting capitalist propaganda.

That is why the social media ban in NZ is being pushed aggressively by some of the country's richest

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people, including the far-right billionaire Mowbray family and entrepreneur Cecilia Robinson, who co-founded group B416 under the slogan “Backing parents, protecting children.”

While the high-powered lobby group received significant media attention, the views of young people themselves have mostly been ignored. In a rare exception, on September 16, the *Bay of Plenty Times* reported on a survey of 595 high school students conducted by 15-year-old Liam Howard, which found that 65.8 percent opposed the bill. Only 21.9 percent supported the ban. Most respondents said social media was important to connect with their peers and they “were highly concerned about losing contact with friends and family if a ban was introduced.”

In the lead-up to the November 7 election, the Labour Party pushed strongly for the social media ban, promising to advance the legislation to its select committee stage within 100 days if it leads the next government.

Labour also called for a law to “require platforms to identify risks and protect Kiwis from harmful content and addictive designs.” Like National, it also promised to establish “an independent online regulator to make sure platforms meet their responsibilities.”

Labour’s ally the Green Party opposes banning teens from social media, calling the proposal ineffective. However, it has called for stronger regulation of social media algorithms. While this is presented as stopping young people from being exposed to “harmful content,” it would mean placing more power in the hands of the state to control and censor the internet.

The 2017–23 Labour-led government, which included the Greens and (in the first three years) the right-wing NZ First Party, carried out a global campaign to censor the internet and social media. Using the 2019 Christchurch massacre by fascist Brenton Tarrant as a pretext, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern set up the Christchurch Call to Action in a joint initiative with French President Emmanuel Macron.

The Christchurch Call’s stated aim is “to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content” from the internet, but this has nothing to do with stopping the far right. The initiative is supported by 56 governments, including several—the US, the major European powers, India, Argentina and Chile—where fascists or right-wing extremists are either in power or are being elevated within the political system.

Tech and social media companies also support the Christchurch Call, including Google, Meta, Amazon and X, which is owned by the fascist Elon Musk. The same companies have systematically censored socialist and anti-war voices, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.

What counts as “harmful” or “extremist content” is being decided by the tech giants themselves, in collaboration with governments such as the Trump administration and the British Labour government, which have labelled protests against the Gaza genocide as supporters of terrorism.

There is no doubt that social media platforms and their billionaire owners cause real harm, including through the amplification of far-right extremist views. But the answer is not to appeal to the capitalist state, which is cultivating the far right in order to suppress and divide the working class.

Workers and young people must oppose every attempt to restrict their ability to access, discuss and share information online. The fight for freedom of speech and against censorship is an essential component of the struggle to build a socialist movement that will put an end to war, fascism and social inequality.

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