

Australian Labor government's social media ban for under-16s provokes mass anger

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
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On November 7, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that his federal Labor government would rapidly implement a previously-floated ban on social media access for all children under the age of 16. The following day he convened a meeting of the “National Cabinet,” an unelected body created during the pandemic, at which the various state and territory leaders, most of them also Labor, endorsed the policy.

While legislation has yet to be introduced to parliament, Albanese has indicated that the government will seek to pass a law mandating the ban in the next weeks and the opposition Liberal-National Coalition have stated they will vote in favor. Once again, the major parties are joining hands to rush through legislation without any popular mandate, in this case to dramatically expand their censorship of the internet.

The significance of the policy is underscored by the fact that it is the first such ban targeting an entire cohort in a purportedly democratic country.

Albanese and his ministers have not provided any coherent rationale for the ban or its supposed urgency. Their most consistent line has been that social media harms the mental health of young people. They have pointed to backward and offensive content on the internet, which is hardly a new phenomenon, as well as safety risks.

And at times, they have combined these talking points with references to the need for children to play outside and interact in person, in comments that often veer towards a nostalgia for 1950s white picket fence suburbia, usually the province of far-right conservatives.

The policy and its various half-baked justifications have provoked widespread anger, from children themselves, parents and the broader community. When Albanese has, ironically, taken to social media to promote the ban, his posts have been flooded with almost universally negative and derisory responses.

Among the obvious points that have been made are that the government has not provided a skerrick of evidence from experts in any field, psychological or technological, of the benefits for what is a far-reaching state intrusion into daily life. Nor have they explained how such a policy would be implemented or enforced.

The mental health and wellbeing argument is refuted fairly easily. How will artificially depriving young people of their primary means of social communication lead to anything, other than increased loneliness, especially for those most vulnerable?

But more generally, the professed concern for mental health is refuted by every single plank of Labor's program.

Labor governments at the state and territory level have repeatedly violated international human rights law to lock up children as young as 12. In Queensland and the Northern Territory, Labor has signaled support for a push by newly installed conservative governments to lower the age of criminal responsibility to just ten-years-old. The poorest and most oppressed children will be able to go to prison, fully six years before they can go online and interact with their peers and eight years before they can vote in an election.

And as commentators have pointed out, Labor has not expressed the slightest interest in addressing child poverty, which by some estimates now afflicts one in six and is undeniably a massive driver of the youth mental illness epidemic. Instead, its response to the inflation crisis has been to inflict the worst reversal to working-class living standards in decades, while ensuring a bonanza for big business.

The uncertainty and stress associated with living in households where their parents have suffered record cuts in wages, rising cost of living increases and 155 percent increase in mortgage payments are dismissed. Access to mental health facilities, already restricted, has plummeted further due to the rollback of bulk billing to see a doctor, making it an unaffordable luxury for working-class families.

One component of the austerity agenda is sweeping cost-cutting targeting the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the market-based funding model for all disability services. One day, Labor is professing its concern for mental health, the next it is boasting of the billions it will cut from disability.

The threadbare character of the rationalisations for the policy are because they are lies. The social media ban is a major attack on democratic rights, an attempt to establish government control over online discussion and to censor the internet.

The fact that young people are the immediate target is hardly an accident. This generation is growing up amid a global crisis of capitalism, unprecedented since the 1930s. The reality of the

youth is a world at war, massive social inequality, climate catastrophe and the rise of authoritarian and fascist governments around the world. And this is politicising them.

Over recent years, social media has been used by young people not only to socialise but, increasingly, to access political material and to organise. Mass climate strikes several years ago, which involved tens of thousands of school students in Australia and hundreds of thousands, or even millions worldwide, were organised almost exclusively through social media platforms.

In the past thirteen months, social media has been the indispensable source of information for youth horrified by the Israeli-backed genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. In Australia, as internationally, school students have conducted several school strikes, which were bitterly denounced by the corporate media and by the Labor government, which has politically, diplomatically and materially backed the Israeli mass murder of Palestinian children.

The Labor government is well aware that the oppositional sentiments among young people will only grow. The environmental crisis continues to worsen, contributed to by Labor's own pro-fossil fuel policies, the social situation deteriorates, driven by its pro-business policies, and the question of war looms ever larger as Labor completes Australia's transformation into a frontline state for a US-led onslaught against China.

The election of the fascist gangster Donald Trump to the US presidency, welcomed by Albanese, has shocked youth in Australia and internationally and will radicalise them further.

The social media ban, however, is also an attack on the general population. Labor has refused to outline any concrete mechanism for its implementation. However, to exclude children under-16, enforcing an age verification program for the entire population would almost certainly be necessary. That would involve people giving their identification and other sensitive personal information to the state and/or the social media conglomerates.

For years, Labor, the Coalition and the ruling elite have railed against relative anonymity online. If people are going to criticise the government, they have more or less openly stated, they should be compelled to put their name to it, including for potential legal action under Australia's far-reaching and anti-democratic defamation laws. That is the line that has been used by every dictatorial and despotic regime in history, aimed at intimidating and silencing dissent.

In its rush to proceed with this attack, Labor has already revealed the illogical and shambolic character of its own policy. This week, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland stated that Snapchat may be exempt from the ban, as it is a messaging service. Some experts have noted, however, that Snapchat's model of private conversations geared around sharing pictures and videos has a higher chance of risk and harm than other platforms being targeted.

YouTube, for instance, is among the designated social media platforms targeted by the ban. But its primary function is for users to upload and view videos, which are subject to fairly rigorous content and harm moderation. Teachers have noted that showing instructional and educational videos from YouTube is an important classroom tool.

One other element of the ban should be noted. In his media conference announcing that the government was pressing ahead with the ban, Albanese declared: "I do want to pay tribute to the campaign that's been run by media organisations on this. I do want to single out NewsCorp for the campaign that they've run..."

For anyone familiar with the output of NewsCorp, the Murdoch stable in Australia, the suggestion that they are crusaders for children's rights will provoke only derision. Murdoch outlets have spearheaded calls for repressive measures targeting Aboriginal and other oppressed children, including imprisonment. They have cheered on Israel's onslaught against Gaza, which has included the murder of at least 13,000 Palestinian children.

It should be recalled that when children organised strikes against the Gaza genocide last year, Murdoch publications uncritically featured the comments of a Zionist leader describing them as "human shields," and proclaiming that all "red lines" had been crossed.

Murdoch and other media conglomerates in Australia are in a dispute with the social media companies. The news corporations are demanding massive cash handouts from Facebook, X/Twitter and other platforms, because of their purportedly indispensable role in providing high value news coverage, but the social media companies have declined to pay out.

This jockeying between rival wings of the corporate elite is undoubtedly a factor. But above all, this is a censorship measure.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls for the widest opposition to the legislation, including protests, school strikes and walkouts. Such a movement, defending the democratic rights of youth, must take up the broader issues faced by the young people, including the struggle against climate change, war and dictatorship. Ultimately, the younger generation can only secure its future by turning to a socialist perspective directed against the source of the crisis, capitalism itself.



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