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Facebook's suspension of Donald Trump is not a free speech issue

On Wednesday, Facebook decided to uphold its suspension of former US President Donald Trump from using its services. In a separate move Thursday, Twitter suspended a 'sock puppet' account for the former President that reposted short messages from his personal website. Trump remains banned on Twitter.



President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference [Credit: AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster]

On January 6, then-President Trump instigated a mob to storm the US Capitol building, aiming to stop the certification of the election and stage a coup. As a part of this operation,

Trump loyalists amongst the military and police orchestrated a stand-down of federal forces in Washington D.C. in order to facilitate the attack.

At 1:10 p.m., Trump concluded a speech near the White House by calling on his supporters to march to the Capitol in order to “take back our country.” Within 40 minutes, rioters breached the doors and windows of the Capitol.

For the next three hours, the rioters would proceed to loot the Capitol, attempted to find, kidnap, or kill lawmakers, and assaulted police officers. But they failed in their stated efforts to “hang Mike Pence,” and the vice president managed to escape to a secure location, where he made a statement at 4:05 p.m. calling on Trump to “demand an end to this siege.”

Once it became clear that the insurrectionists had failed to capture any lawmakers, Trump issued a statement reiterating his support for the rioters, but calling on them to retreat from the Capitol. He later tweeted at 6:07 p.m., calling the rioters “great patriots who have been badly unfairly treated for so long.” This statement was reposted on his Facebook account.

At 6:15 p.m., Facebook removed Trump’s post and blocked him from its service. At 7:02 p.m., Twitter followed suit, suspending Trump’s account.

Trump’s initial suspension from Facebook and Twitter was met with opposition not only from Trump’s fascist supporters, but from libertarian journalists, including John Pilger, Glenn Greenwald, Chris Hedges and Joe Lauria of Consortium News.

These journalists paired their opposition to the suppression of Trump’s Twitter account with efforts to minimize—some to the point of justifying—Trump’s actions. They have deliberately downplayed and dismissed, in the face of overwhelming evidence, the significance of what occurred on January 6.

Replying to Facebook’s reaffirmation of Trump’s earlier suspension, journalist Glenn Greenwald commented Wednesday, “The fact that Facebook has courts that decide who can and can't be heard on monopolistic speech platforms is tyrannical. Here's a reminder that leaders around the world—many of whom dislike Trump—condemned Facebook's removal of Trump.”

Responding to Twitter's actions, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on January 16:

A class-conscious analysis, informed by Marxism and the historical experience of the international socialist movement, would explain that Twitter's action took place within the context of an acute crisis within the bourgeois state, in which its highly compromised semi-constitutional faction, threatened with violent overthrow, sought to block Trump from mobilizing his fascist followers. Why should left-wing opponents of the attempted coup oppose the disruption of Trump's communications? In fact, had Twitter not taken this action, socialists would quite correctly interpret its "neutrality" as open complicity with the conspirators.

Moreover, as part of their own independent efforts to mobilize working class opposition to Trump's conspiracy, socialists would urge Twitter workers and others employed in the technology industry to cut off his access to social media and to disrupt the communication networks of his armed followers. There were, in fact, many demands from Twitter workers for precisely such action, which was a significant factor in Twitter's decision to shut down Trump's account. An article in *Vanity Fair* earlier this week notes that "Twitter may have had its own insurrection if it did not dump Trump." [Do Trump's defenders] consider such demands from workers an impermissible violation of free speech?

The *World Socialist Web Site* is not indifferent to the consequences of a successful fascistic overthrow of the US government. The danger posed by "Big Tech" and the Democratic Party will not be solved by passively accepting, under the cover of the unconditional defense of free speech, the establishment of an authoritarian regime led by Trump, backed by fascist organizations. Our slogan in the midst of a fascist assault on Congress is not: "Hands off Hitler! Free Speech for Trump!"

Nothing that has transpired in the subsequent months makes it necessary to change this analysis. Trump continues to falsely claim he won the 2020 election and continues to mobilize violent right-wing extremists. He would, if he had the means, carry out another violent coup d'état tomorrow.

Subsequent reporting has only demonstrated the degree of planning and organization of the insurrectionists—who had offsite weapons caches ready to deploy if their plot

succeeded. Internal documents from the military and capitol police testify to the scope of the military/police stand-down that allowed the insurrectionists to breach the capitol.

Trump's suspension from Facebook is not a free speech issue. His social media accounts were suspended in the midst of an effort to overthrow a presidential election and install himself as dictator.

At the time, Trump was not a private citizen, but the commander-in-chief of the US military, using the vast powers of the presidency in an effort to destroy democratic rights in the United States. Despite the failure of Trump's coup, he remains the effective head of the Republican Party, capable of mobilizing the vast apparatus of one of the oldest political machines in the world.

The decision by Facebook and Twitter to shut down Trump's social media accounts took place in the context of a bitter struggle within the ruling class between its pseudo-democratic and openly fascist factions. There was no small element of self-preservation involved: the social media executives, like Trump's opponents within the Democratic Party, could have expected to see a jail cell if Trump had succeeded in making himself dictator.

The working class and its socialist leadership are not a party to the factional struggle within the capitalist state. We have never raised the demand for private corporations to shut down Trump's communications, and we have never promoted the illusion that Trump's suspension from these services will stop the threat of fascism.

But it is not the task of the Marxist movement to demand that Trump have unfettered access to Twitter and Facebook. Marxists do not positively demand that free speech be accorded to fascists, or that no measures be taken, for fear of infringing on the free speech of fascist conspirators, to counteract uninhibited communication between the leader of a right-wing coup and his followers.

Among the journalists demanding the reinstatement of Trump's social media accounts, there is more at work than libertarian muddle-headedness: There is no small element of a cowardly adaptation to the extreme right.

Unlike these unmoored journalists, the WSWS's opposition to the fascist right is unwavering. Drawing on the lessons of history, we know that the fascist forces being mobilized behind Trump pose an existential threat to the working class and its socialist leadership.

Appeals to the repressive apparatus of the state or to corporations will not protect democracy in the United States or anywhere else. The struggle against fascism can only be successful to the extent that it mobilizes the working class in the struggle for socialism. The demand that violent fascists openly plotting to set up a dictatorship be given unfettered access to communications plays no role in the building of such a movement.

The fact is that social media censorship overwhelmingly targets the left, not the right. Last year, Google CEO Sundar Pichai admitted that the company censors the *World Socialist Web Site*, and the WSWS remains buried in search results for “socialism,” “socialist,” “Trotskyism,” and “class struggle,” despite being universally recognized as the most comprehensive authority on these issues.

For months, Facebook blocked the sharing of a WSWS article opposing the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was a Chinese-made bioweapon, and anyone who attempted to share the article was either warned or suspended. Leading members of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board—including US managing editor Niles Niemuth—have been suspended from Facebook entirely without cause.

Greenwald and his co-thinkers, while condemning Facebook's supposed violation of Trump's free speech, have made no mention of the ongoing censorship of the *World Socialist Web Site*. In fact, in November, Chris Hedges bluntly refused, in response to an appeal by WSWS international editorial board Chairman David North, to make a statement opposing the suspension of the Twitter account of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), claiming he was too busy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has far worthier figures to defend than the would-be fascist dictator Donald Trump. We will continue to expose the censorship of left-wing, antiwar and socialist web sites and organizations. And we will continue to do everything in our power to publicize the plight of jailed journalists, such as Julian Assange, victimized

workers, and scientists like Rebekah Jones who come under attack for opposing the homicidal policies of capitalist governments.

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