

Jacobin urges readers to “log off” social media

By Will Morrow
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An article published on November 29 by *Jacobin* magazine, the publication affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, calls for the “dismantling” of social media. Entitled “Log off” and written by DSA member Benjamin Fong, it argues that Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms have become damaging to the health of the population, are “destructive for the left,” and should be done away with.

The abysmal level of the article, laden with pseudo-psychological musings, can be inferred from the summary appearing under the headline, “Social media will always be destructive for the Left. We should log the f**k off.”

The call for the abolition of social media by a purportedly left-wing publication does not take place in a social and political vacuum. *Jacobin* is aligning itself with an international campaign for internet censorship by the ruling class.

Within the United States, this has been led by the Democratic Party and publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Primarily, they have based it upon the McCarthyite claim that Russian meddling via paid Facebook ads during and since the 2016 elections are sowing “discord” and “polarization” in America and undermining “democracy.”

According to this narrative, Russia, and not the unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich and impoverishment of the mass of the population, is responsible for the hostility of the working class towards both corporate-controlled parties.

The *New York Times* has concocted a secondary “human rights” rationale for Facebook censorship, claiming that social media is responsible for state-backed mass violence against the Rohingya population in Myanmar, and threatens to provoke similar acts elsewhere. The implication is that, provided with the tool to communicate without government control, the

population will be unable to restrain its inner homicidal urges.

The real concern, however, is neither Russian trolls nor right-wing violence, but growing left-wing struggles by workers and young people. The ruling class is responding by seeking to prevent workers and youth from organizing and communicating outside the control of the official institutions of the capitalist state, corporate media and trade unions.

In *Jacobin*’s article, Fong provides a somewhat altered version of the above-mentioned pretexts for censorship. He writes that “bad behavior happens on the internet,” and “in real life too,” but “there is a special quality to the depravity exhibited on social media that is particular to the domain.” The article is full of sweeping generalizations claiming that social media has a negative impact on the population’s psychology, such as the claim that it “demonstrates a psychopathic character contradiction: an obsession with self-perception by others in combination with a disturbing lack of empathy...”

Fong makes clear that his objection is not to the private ownership of social media companies, explicitly rejecting the idea that “taking social media out of private control would allow us finally to realize the fantasy that sustains it.” Rather, the problem is with social media itself.

Fong concludes with the authoritarian declaration that “the sooner we realize” the truth about social media, “the sooner we can get to the work of dismantling it.”

What is most remarkable about the article is not what it says, but what it does not say. In an article published by an organization that claims to be socialist weighing the pros and cons of social media, there is no reference to the fact that mass struggles by the workers around the world against inequality and the politics of the ruling class have been organized this year through social media.

One would have no idea that for the past month, France has been gripped by mass demonstrations organized on

Facebook involving hundreds of thousands of workers against the despised president-banker Emmanuel Macron. Workers are posting videos of police violence, sharing information about the protests and discussing issues in Facebook groups that have as many as 300,000 people.

Nor would one know that earlier this year in the United States itself, teachers in West Virginia utilized social media to organize wildcat strikes culminating in a state-wide walkout, and to then defy the order by the teachers' unions after two days to return to their schools.

The omission is no accident. The democratic potential of the internet and social media terrifies the ruling class above all because it provides a platform for workers to organize independently of the trade union apparatuses, which for decades have served as the reliable partners of the corporations and governments in suppressing and isolating workers' struggles and keeping strikes at the lowest levels in history. The mass demonstrations in France have been so explosive because they have developed independently of the CGT and other unions, which initially responded to the protests with open hostility.

Jacobin and the DSA are oriented not to the working class but to the trade union apparatuses. They defend the unions against workers because they speak for layers of the middle class, approximately in the top 10 percent of the income scale, who hope for positions as union officials and executives with incomes in the top two or three percent.

Jacobin supported the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers in West Virginia as they sought to regain control of the teachers' struggle and impose a sellout. It then hailed the rotten agreement with billionaire governor Jim Justice as a "victory." It has also written almost nothing about the protests shaking France.

The article also makes no mention of the actual internet censorship measures that have been implemented in the last two years under pressure from the Democratic Party and intelligence agencies. These include Facebook's censorship of alternative news sites on the "News Feed" and promotion of "authoritative sources" such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

Indeed, Fong's arguments mirror those of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in January as part of his justification for censoring the social media platform. Many of the posts of Facebook, he said, are "crowding out the personal moments that lead us to connect with each other," so the algorithms will be restructured to "encourage meaningful interactions between people."

On the basis of Facebook's supposed concern for the psychological well-being of users, it has moved to sharply reduce exposure to left-wing publications and opinions.

The DSA has been totally silent on the ruling class' campaign of internet censorship. The organization is a faction of the Democratic Party and tries to maintain illusions in the population that this alliance of Wall Street, the Pentagon and the CIA can be transformed into an outfit for progressive change, even as it leads the drive for censorship and repression. It is for this reason that *Jacobin* itself has not been a target of internet censorship, as has the *World Socialist Web Site*, which fights for workers to break from both the Democratic Party and the trade unions and to build independent organizations of class struggle and a genuinely revolutionary party.

Perhaps because of concerns that their backing of censorship has been too openly exposed by Fong's article, *Jacobin* published a follow-up article on December 6, entitled, "Unfortunately, we can't log off." The article, however, does not oppose or mention the drive to censor the internet, or the emergence of mass struggles by workers organized online. Its criticism of Fong's article is purely tactical: that the DSA should continue to utilize social media to expand its influence.

If the conclusions that Fong draws in his article were not so authoritarian, they would be almost comical. Does this organization really believe, one is tempted to ask, that one of the greatest technological transformations in modern history, with some two billion people around the world turning to social media use to communicate instantaneously, will be halted because they appeal to people to "log off"?

In fact, *Jacobin*'s appeal is not directed to the working class, but to the capitalist state. The article is aimed at providing a pseudo-left rationale for mass censorship among the middle-class layers who read the publication in the orbit of the Democratic Party. The ruling class' drive to wipe out social media, they will argue, will make people more empathetic, and should be welcomed. In short, it combines idiocy with middle-class terror in the face of growing struggles by the working class.

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