

“Yellow Vest” Facebook group with 350,000 members frozen on European election day

By Will Morrow
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On Sunday, polling day in the European elections, the largest Facebook group associated with the “yellow vest” protests in France, with more than 350,000 members, was frozen so that members could not publish or share information in it.

The group, named “France in anger—Map of rallies” (*France en colère—Carte des rassemblements*), is used by its members to organize locations for “yellow vest” demonstrations against the Emmanuel Macron government and to share news articles, political statements and videos of police violence.

At 12:29 p.m. on Sunday, one of the group’s administrators posted a notice informing members that “following automatic changes introduced by Facebook beginning on May 6, 2019, notifications for Yellow Vest groups hardly appear, giving the impression of inactivity of the movement.” The message provided instructions for members to manually override the changes introduced by Facebook to show notifications for new activity.

The administrators further announced that “we have been encountering major technical difficulties since this morning,” without providing further information. “We are not able to find a durable solution at present. We are therefore taking the delicate decision to put the group on pause. We hope for a resolution of the situation at the end of the evening.” The freeze lasted until the early hours of yesterday morning.

In a Facebook group, every member can post material to the group’s feed, which is visible to every other member. Many group members posted comments in response to the announcement opposing Facebook’s act of censorship. Some said they were able to add comments to existing posts, but could not publish or share posts.

“In effect, I made the change as indicated because it

seemed that no one was commenting. Long live Facebook’s censorship,” said one. “I’m sure that Facebook is intentionally disrupting this group,” said another. “Impossible to publish and therefore to inform,” replied a third.

Others pointed to the recent visit paid by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to President Macron on May 10. “Since Macron’s visit with the head of Facebook, I am only receiving a very small number of notifications of the page in my news feed,” another wrote. “Dictatorship, and it’s not by chance that Macron met the Facebook director. Dictatorship.”

No further information has been published by either the group administrators or Facebook as to the restrictions on its notifications and postings. It is inconceivable, however, that actions by Facebook to restrict information on the “yellow vest” group could be made without the direct participation and input of the Macron government.

The Macron government and other major European states have utilized the European Union (EU) elections to intensify their collaboration with Facebook to censor the social media network, under the banner of fighting “fake news” and “polarizing” content.

This is viewed as a critical feature of the drive to suppress the growth of strikes, demonstrations and other forms of social opposition in the working class, which are increasingly organized online. The “yellow vest” protests have been organized almost entirely on Facebook, as has the growing opposition of French teachers, who are organizing demonstrations on Facebook against the Macron government’s reactionary “Blanquer” education reforms. A video of police tear-gassing protesting teachers in Toulouse last Thursday has been viewed thousands of times, primarily via the “Red Pens” Facebook group.

Zuckerberg's meeting with Macron on May 10 reviewed the first half of a year-long collaboration—the first of its kind with any government in the world—in which French officials have been invited directly into Facebook's content "moderation" offices to analyze the material censored from users' news feeds. Because what shows up in a given user's news feed is determined by Facebook's own algorithms, the company and the state can control the spread of material.

Zuckerberg, who has a personal net worth of US\$67.3 billion, later wrote that the purpose of the meeting was to review "nuanced decisions" that have to be made as to "how we should handle content that isn't illegal but might cause harm." In other words, it was to discuss the suppression of content that is "not illegal"—i.e., legally protected free speech. Of course, as under the tsarist censors of old, what is considered "harmful" is determined by the ruling class and its police agencies.

The Macron government's report on its cooperation with Facebook, published to coincide with Zuckerberg's visit, made clear that "harmful" content is any material—including videos of police violence, strikes by workers and demonstrations—that encourages or gives expression to the opposition among young people and workers to the policies of the political establishment and the unprecedented levels of poverty and hoarding of wealth by the financial oligarchy.

Or, in the words of the report, Facebook's ability to determine what content is displayed on a user's news feed "plays an essential role" in the "capacity of social media networks to prevent or accentuate problems in social cohesion."

The report laid out the government's strategy of "making the social media platforms responsible" for censoring social media. Working directly with the social media giants would "have the benefit of minimizing the opening for criticisms related to the risk of manipulating information" by the state, the report explains. In other words, actions would be taken by Facebook, rather than in the name of the government and its intelligence agencies, to avoid challenges to the violation of the population's free speech rights.

Facebook established a censorship headquarters for this year's European elections, which it dubbed its "war room," in Dublin, which the *Guardian* newspaper

visited this month. The newspaper reported on May 5 that until the vote, "and for several days after, about 40 people will be hunched over screens around the clock, monitoring the shifting pace of online conversation, looking for signs of manipulation, fake news or hate speech." They are "backed up by a global network including threat intelligence experts, data scientists, researchers and engineers."

The supposed struggle against "fake news" is the justification for the unlimited censorship of news information that does not conform to the lies of the government and its propaganda mouthpieces in the corporate media. A central target of the censorship of the technology corporations, including Google, has been the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The crackdown on social media is part of a far-reaching assault on free speech and democratic rights of the working class and the preparations for dictatorship by a ruling class that feels itself besieged by the growth of working-class struggles.

Google is blocking the *World Socialist Web Site* from search results.

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