

White House bans TikTok and WeChat: A major intensification of internet censorship

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In a major escalation of the anti-China campaign ahead of the election, the Trump administration announced on Friday that it was following through on its executive orders of August 6 and banning the social media apps TikTok and WeChat from being downloaded from US app stores on Sunday.

The move is a frontal assault on the freedom of expression and an effort to consolidate control of the internet by a handful of massive corporations working in partnership with the American government. TikTok is used by millions of people every day to connect with friends and family, share ideas and communicate, and has been used to organize social protests. WeChat is a major link of communication between the United States and China.

An official statement released by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said downloads and new versions of the two mobile apps would be prohibited on Apple and Android app stores as of September 20.

With regard to WeChat, the Commerce Department statement prohibits all electronic payments and funds transfers as well as the hosting, transferring internet traffic or “utilization of the mobile application’s constituent code” within the US. WeChat, “for all practical purposes... will be shut down in the US, but only in the US, as of midnight Monday,” Ross said.

TikTok faces a similar US ban on November 12, unless the Trump administration approves the proposal made last weekend by the American software giant Oracle Corporation to become a “trusted tech partner” with ByteDance, the Chinese company that currently owns it.

The transfer of TikTok to US ownership would be aimed at creating conditions in which it can be subject to the same type of government-backed censorship that has already been implemented by Google, Facebook, Twitter and other US-based social media companies.

TikTok is the tenth most popular social media platform in the world, with 500 million users, 100 million of which

are in the US.

WeChat is the fifth largest social media platform in the world, with 1.06 billion users, of which 3.3 million are in the US. Described as China’s “app for everything,” WeChat is a multipurpose instant messaging, social media and mobile payment app owned by Tencent Holdings.

The impact of this shutdown was explained by the WeChat Users Alliance, a non-profit group founded by five Chinese-American lawyers after Trump’s executive order was announced: “WeChat is a messaging app most commonly used by several million Chinese Americans in the U.S. Many other non-Chinese Americans also use it to communicate with their friends, clients, or business partners whose first language is Chinese. The complete ban of WeChat will severely affect the lives and the work of millions of people in the U.S. They will have a difficult time talking to family, relatives and friends back in China.”

Michael Bien, a San Francisco attorney representing the organization, said that WeChat is the primary way for many of its US users to communicate, organize social groups, run businesses and engage in political activities. Bien said, “It is our contention that [the ban] violates the Constitution, as you cannot censor such a fundamental part of communication, especially when it affects an insular group that has historically been a minority that’s been subject to discrimination in the US, by law or by practice.”

The Trump administration’s actions against TikTok and WeChat are an attack on the ability of the working class to both express itself politically and to freely communicate in daily life.

Every worker and young person in the US must reject the Trump administration’s attempt to whip up reactionary anti-Chinese sentiments on the basis of unsubstantiated claims of “national security” threats.

Not one shred of evidence has been presented to back up US government claims that TikTok or WeChat have

been engaged in a “malicious collection of American citizens’ personal data” and are active participants in “China’s civil-military fusion” in mandatory “cooperation with the intelligence services” of the Chinese Communist Party, as claimed by Ross.

Any objective assessment of the two apps thoroughly contradicts the Trump administration’s attacks on TikTok and WeChat and shows that the emergence of the China-based social media platforms is part of the globalization and integration of the world economy that has been accelerating over the last four decades.

Social media platforms—such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—emerged as a consequence of the convergence of smartphones and tablets with wireless broadband Internet services internationally in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The initial years of this global development—Facebook was launched in 2004, fourth generation wireless Internet access (4G) was first available in 2006 and the first model of the Apple iPhone was released in 2007—were dominated by US companies.

The adoption of these technologies spread rapidly throughout the world over the next decade. For example, in 2007 only 1 percent of the population of the developing world had mobile broadband subscriptions. Today this number is approaching 85 percent.

During this period, the integration of the US and China in the development and production of these technologies expanded dramatically. The relationship of Apple to the Taiwanese Foxconn and Pegatron—which both have facilities in Shenzhen, China where hundreds of millions of iPhones have been assembled by highly exploited Chinese factory workers—is but one example of this process.

Globalization has integrated the US and China on many levels, economically, scientifically, academically and culturally. The number of Chinese immigrants in the US has grown seven-fold since 1980, reaching 2.5 million people in 2018. The effort by the Trump administration to demonize China by attacking the immensely popular social media apps expresses a level of reckless desperation within the administration.

Amidst growing social and political opposition within the US, accelerated by the disaster sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, the ruling class is seeking to divert tensions outward by provoking an international conflict with China.

The central target of the economic attacks on China is just as much the working class at home as it is the external “enemy.” As demonstrated by the ban on TikTok

and WeChat, the US-China conflict has already become the occasion for major inroads on the freedom of speech, and the escalation of the conflict would create a pretext of further attacks on democratic rights.

No one should have illusions that the Democrats are opposed to Trump’s anti-Chinese aggression. They have fully embraced the framework spelled out by the White House and have claimed that Trump is “soft” on China.

As Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, told the *Wall Street Journal* on September 10, “Regardless of who wins, US policy toward China is going to be tougher over the next five years than the last five years. China has changed, and the US thinking on China has changed.”

Writing in the *New York Times* on Tuesday, economic historian Chris Miller wrote an op-ed column entitled “America Is Going to Decapitate Huawei,” where he warns that the US global lead in technology is waning. “Huawei’s digital decapitation is a shocking display of American power. At the whim of the American president, any other Chinese tech company could suffer such a fate. Imagine if a foreign power could do the same to Google or Amazon.”

The attacks on Huawei, TikTok and WeChat are all demonstrations of the criminality of American imperialism, but also ultimately an expression of the weakness and decline of the world hegemon that emerged after World War II. The US is using its geopolitical leverage to destroy the competitors to US-based social media companies.

Only the international working class has the ability to stop the descent into nationalist antagonisms that are leading from economic wars to military conflict and a new Third World War. The objective unity of the working class across national borders is the foundation of the struggle for socialism that must be taken up in the US, China and every country throughout the globe.

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