Corruption-plagued NYPD tramples on democratic rights

Ali Ismail
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The draconian response of the New York Police Department to the ongoing anti-Wall Street protests in the city is part of a stepped-up attack on democratic rights.

New York police have also targeted Muslim-Americans and Muslim immigrants in the past decade, with revelations last August by the Associated Press and others of an unprecedented and illegal spying operation against Muslims in close collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency.

Last Friday hundreds of Muslims and supporters gathered at Foley Square in lower Manhattan to protest the spying operation. They carried signs saying, "NYPD Watches Us. Who Watches NYPD?" and "NYPD/CIA. Hands Off Our People." The protesters were joined by about 50 supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement, whose two-month-old encampment in nearby Zuccotti Park had been brutally attacked and dismantled by the police three days earlier. Protesters chanted, "Surveillance is violence, we won't remain silent."

Hundreds of undercover officers have been sent into Muslim communities by the police intelligence division in recent years. They have been tasked with monitoring daily activities in bookstores, bars, cafes and nightclubs frequented by Muslims, according to the AP report. The police have also been sending informants inside mosques to spy on Muslims attending prayer services and to monitor sermons.

Speaking to the NY1 television station last week, attorney Lamar Deek said the NYPD was also spying on Muslim schoolchildren. "I saw the documents myself, and I have to say there were several elementary schools, Muslim elementary schools, listed," said Deek. "They can deny it all they want." The fact that the city's police intelligence agents set up extra-legal operations far outside of the NYPD's jurisdiction demonstrates the massive scale of the operation. The NYPD has been spying on Muslims living in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. According to the AP, the NYPD regularly shredded documents related to the operation in case of possible legal challenges to its illegal surveillance of ordinary citizens.

At the same time, a series of scandals have exposed rampant corruption inside the largest local police department in the US. Last month, 16 officers were accused in connection with an extensive and longstanding ticket-fixing scandal in the Bronx. They were charged with helping friends and family avoid paying for traffic violations. Those indicted included many delegates of the police union, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association.

When the accused officers were arraigned in the Bronx, hundreds of their fellow cops staged a raucous demonstration. They heckled Bronx residents and prevented reporters from getting inside the courtroom, according to news accounts. Mayor Bloomberg tried to suggest that the peaceful Occupy Wall Street protest was "disruptive," but the police, entrusted with the job of enforcing increasing attacks on the working class, set their own rules and get away with what would be otherwise labeled disorderly conduct.

The ticket-fixing scandal is only one of a number that have been in the headlines in recent weeks. Some police officers were arrested in a gun-running sting operation. In another case, a Brooklyn Supreme Court Justice, clearly concerned over the social and political dangers flowing from the exposure of police misconduct, voiced his alarm after a narcotics officer was found guilty in his courtroom of planting drugs on two innocent people. "This court is shocked, not only by the seeming pervasive scope of

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misconduct, but even more by the seeming casualness by which such conduct is deployed," said Justice Gustin Reichbach, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

All of these cases are in addition to the ongoing scandal of stop-and-frisk practices that have victimized hundreds of thousands of innocent young men, largely black and Hispanic, who have been singled out for stops and searches in recent years. Officer Michael Daragjati was recently arrested on federal civil rights charges in connection with the use of a racial slur in referring to a false stop and arrest of a 31-year-old African-American. This case, however, only arose because the cop was caught on tape. More than 1 million have faced these tactics in the last three years alone, although they only rarely result in any arrests.

The police attacks on the Occupy Wall Street protesters have gotten most attention in recent weeks, not only in New York but throughout the US, most notoriously in the pepper spraying of students at UC Davis in California. Many demonstrators have been viciously manhandled, beaten or pepper sprayed by police officers since the protests first began on September 17.

While the corporate executives and Wall Street speculators responsible for the economic crisis conduct business as usual without fear of arrest or prosecution, police forces around the country have cracked down brutally on students and workers protesting against the corporate domination of political life. Thousands of demonstrators have been arrested since the protests first began two months ago, including more than 1,000 in New York City alone.

On November 17, Occupy protests throughout the country were met with a heavy police presence. In New York City, nearly 200 people were arrested as protesters marked two months since the beginning of the occupation of Zuccotti Park in the heart of the city's financial district. Police met protesters with drawn batons and metal barricades as they marched towards the New York Stock Exchange that morning. Later in the afternoon Zuccotti Park was closed off by the police and demonstrators were barred from entering or exiting. When a scuffle broke out over control of the barricades, demonstrators were violently thrown to the ground by the police. Nineteen-year-old Brandon Watts was seriously injured during the scuffle.

The November 17 protests took place amid widespread outrage over the forcible expulsion of demonstrators from Zuccotti Park two days earlier. In a pre-dawn raid, hundreds of riot-equipped police officers descended on the park and roughed up protesters as they tore down their tents. Police shields, batons and pepper spray were used to drive demonstrators out of the park and surrounding area. "I was bleeding profusely. They shoved a lot of people's faces into the ground," protester Max Luisdaniel Santos, 31, told the Associated Press. Journalists and legal observers were barred from the scene during the raid for the purpose of shielding the Bloomberg administration from public scrutiny.

Pepper spray has been used repeatedly by the NYPD in its attempt to intimidate and suppress protesters. Two young women were pepper sprayed by NYPD deputy inspector Anthony Bologna in October. The incident was caught on tape, sparking outrage across the country and increasing popular support for the protests. While Bologna clearly assaulted the two women without cause, the NYPD has refused to take any serious disciplinary action against him other than transferring him to Staten Island and eliminating 10 days of his vacation time.

According to witnesses, the NYPD used a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a "sound cannon" used to disperse crowds during Thursday's protests. The device was used repeatedly to emit short, sharp bursts of sound in order to control the crowd. The devices are known to cause hearing loss, headaches and nausea. Critics have warned the devices could potentially be abused by civilian agencies. LRADs have previously been used by the US military against ordinary Iraqis resisting the neo-colonial occupation of their country.

Police department corruption and attacks on democratic rights go hand in hand. In violently suppressing anti-Wall Street protesters and carrying out spying operations against Muslims, the ruling elite is making it clear it will no longer tolerate the slightest opposition to capitalist austerity and imperialist war.

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