

Drones over America

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Recently revealed plans to deploy tens of thousands of military drones over the US mainland in the coming years expose a significant component of the developing infrastructure of an American police state.

According to government estimates, 30,000 drones could be buzzing overhead within the next decade. These drones will operate out of at least 110 military bases located in 39 states around the country. Ordnance is already being stockpiled, pilots and crews are being trained and airspace is being cordoned off.

These drones range from small surveillance planes weighing a few pounds to armed airships carrying thousands of pounds of equipment and armaments. Under development is a new generation of micro air vehicles (MAVs) that are no larger than insects and capable of entering homes and workplaces undetected to photograph, record and even kill.

Hundreds of drones are already deployed over the US, with local law enforcement agencies acquiring their own drones as well. And these are just the drones we know about.

According to an ABC News report, “Drones can carry facial recognition cameras, license plate scanners, thermal imaging cameras, open WiFi sniffers, and other sensors. And they can be armed.” The precise technological capabilities of these drones, developed by defense giants such as Northrop Grumman at a cost of billions of dollars, are a closely guarded state secret.

Nevertheless, the surveillance potential of today's drones makes the spying carried out by the dictatorships of the last century look like child's play. Everywhere one goes, everything one says, everything one does—even within one's home—can now be surreptitiously observed, recorded, and collected in huge government databanks being secretly constructed by the Obama administration. (See: “Obama administration expands illegal surveillance of Americans”)

The deployment of these drones is consistent with efforts to militarize, regiment, and keep close watch on the lives of ordinary Americans. Pervasive surveillance is the new normal. Walking down the street on any given day, how can a person know whether or not at that precise moment an armed drone miles overhead is zeroing in on his or her movements?

In addition to their Orwellian surveillance potential, it goes without saying that drones can also be used for killing. Drones have already been used to carry out the assassinations of thousands of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere, including US citizens, in the course of the Obama administration's “targeted killing” program. The drone pilots, safe behind video screens, refer to their victims as “bug splats.”

With tens of thousands of drones deployed over the mainland, the potential exists to use them to “take out” undesirable individuals within the US, or even gatherings of such individuals. When the 110 planned drone bases are completed, nowhere in the country will be outside immediate striking distance.

The arrangements to deploy these tens of thousands of drones were made entirely behind the backs of the American people. There was no debate in Congress, and despite it being an election year, neither of the two major political parties has raised the issue.

No controls have been put in place with respect to these drones. In fact, Obama signed a bill in February lifting restrictions that might have stood in the way of the rapid integration of drones “into the national airspace system.” Outside of a few scattered reports, the corporate-controlled media has remained silent.

The buildup of the infrastructure of a police state is directed at the massive social upheavals on the horizon. The ruling elite anticipates that the American working class will not tolerate indefinitely attack after attack on its living standards, cuts to social programs, and

unending war. Opposition will inevitably develop. When it does, armed drones will be watching.

The deployment of drones over the US is one more confirmation that the police-state measures implemented in the so-called “war on terror”—warrantless surveillance, torture, military commissions, incommunicado detention without trial, and “kill lists”—will ultimately be directed at the American people.

It is not a coincidence that the revelations concerning the deployment of drones coincide with the recent frame-up of anti-war protesters in Chicago on “terrorism” charges. Given that they are charged with “terrorism,” there is nothing in principle preventing the US government from causing these protesters to “disappear” into the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, or in future cases from eliminating them with a Predator drone.

Centuries-old democratic legal protections that once may have been thought to stand in the way of such actions by the US government—such as the Fourteenth Amendment, the right of habeas corpus, and the Bill of Rights—have all in recent years been substantially eroded. From a legal standpoint, the way is now clear for the assassination of US citizens on secret orders from the president. (See: “Military tribunals and assassination”)

Underlying the collapse of democratic rights is the spectacular growth in social inequality. That growth has been substantiated by official figures, such as the latest statistics from the Federal Reserve Board showing the plummeting of the median net worth of US families by 38.9 percent between 2007 and 2010, even as corporate profits soared. Democracy is inconsistent with the resulting conditions of unprecedented social inequality.

It is noteworthy that no significant opposition to the deployment of these drones has developed within the liberal and pseudo-left establishment. The reason for this is that these layers are preparing to campaign and vote for Obama in the 2012 elections.

Under Obama, the attacks on democratic rights launched by the Bush administration have intensified. This demonstrates that the collapse of democratic rights in the US is determined not by the personal characteristics of the individual in the White House, or which of the two capitalist parties wins the elections.

Instead, it is an expression of the basic tendencies of capitalism internationally and the result of the essential policy of the ruling class as a whole as it confronts the historic crisis of its system.

Opposition to the buildup of an American police state cannot be expressed in a vote for either of the two capitalist parties contesting the upcoming elections in the US. The defense of the most basic democratic rights and social conditions of working people, the vast majority of the population, can be waged only through the building of an independent mass party of the working class in the US and internationally in direct opposition to the capitalist system. Only such a movement can put an end to police states and social inequality, defend and expand democratic rights, and address the fundamental crisis facing mankind. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party.

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