

# Massive expansion of domestic spying under Obama

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10 July 2012

Cell phone companies reported that US government bodies, including federal, state and local law enforcement agencies and courts, made at least 1.3 million demands for subscriber information in 2011.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, telecommunications companies routinely hand over thousands of pieces of information every day about their customers, including the contents of text messages and caller locations. One of the largest carriers, AT&T, responds to more than 700 government requests for information each day, while another major cell phone company, Sprint, reported that it had received an average of 1,500 government requests each day last year.

Nine telecom companies reported evidence of this pervasive state surveillance of their customers in response to an inquiry from a congressional committee investigating the increased use of phone tapping and other forms of data mining. The *Times* reports that because of incomplete record-keeping, the actual number of government demands for cell phone users' private information was almost certainly far higher than the 1.3 million figure reported to Congress.

The cell phone companies reported that government agencies have increased their requests for subscriber information at a rate of 12 percent to 16 percent per year over the past five years. Many of the demands for cell phone information are not accompanied by court orders or legal subpoenas, meaning that even the nominal safeguards against warrantless invasions of privacy are now routinely flouted.

State surveillance of cell phone use is now so pervasive that there was actually a fall in the number of police requests for wiretapping warrants made to US courts last year.

The level of US government spying of cell phone use

would be the envy of any police state, and marks the American population as one of the most surveilled in the world.

“Whether they realize it or not, Americans are carrying tracking devices with them wherever they go,” said American Civil Liberties Union spokesman Christopher Calabrese in response to the revelations to Congress from the cell phone carriers. “The cell phone data of innocent Americans is almost certainly swept up in these requests,” he added.

The ACLU also reported findings from its own study of local law enforcement agencies' use of cell records, finding that some police departments have invested in their own cell phone tracking technology, allowing them to bypass even the very limited safeguards maintained by the carriers. In addition, the civil liberties group found that some telecom companies maintained their own permanent records of all private cell phone use, giving them and the government a massive trove of data through which to trawl.

Such is the demand from US government bodies for cell phone users' private details that carriers now maintain large teams of technicians and lawyers to process the round-the-clock deluge of requests. While most companies did not state to the congressional inquiry how many government requests for cell phone records were denied, one small carrier, C Spire Wireless, recorded that it had rejected only around 15 percent of the 12,500 law enforcement demands it received over the past five years.

Rep. Edward Markey (Democrat of Massachusetts), who released the results of the congressional inquiry to the *Times*, described the level of demand for cell phone information by law enforcement agencies as “startling.”

“We cannot allow privacy protections to be swept

aside with the sweeping nature of these information requests,” the Democratic congressman stated. “Law enforcement agencies are looking for a needle, but what are they doing with the haystack?”

Despite such professions of concern, it is the Democratic Party that is leading the way in shredding the democratic rights of the US population. The Obama administration set a major precedent for the expansion of unwarranted state surveillance in the US when it worked to grant legal immunity to phone companies that had participated in the Bush-era program of illegal wiretapping carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA).

Together with the Democratic-controlled Congress, in 2009 newly elected President Obama upheld the previous administration’s effort to shield government agencies and telecom companies from private lawsuits that sought to uphold individual privacy against domestic spying. This culminated in the decision by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in January this year to dismiss 33 lawsuits against companies that had participated in warrantless electronic surveillance.

The *New York Times* played its own part in covering up the criminal operations of the US government when in 2003 it withheld a story for over one year about the Bush administration’s program of domestic spying. The editors of the US “newspaper of record” released their account of the NSA’s illegal wiretapping only after the 2004 elections in order to protect the Bush White House and minimize public discussion of the attacks on democratic rights.

Given this role, and its current efforts to downplay the erosion of democratic rights by both parties and at all levels of the state, one can only guess as to what other crimes the *New York Times* and its fellow media conglomerates are covering up.

There exists no significant constituency in the US bourgeoisie committed to the maintenance of democratic rights, such as the right to privacy clearly established within the US Constitution and extended under subsequent pieces of legislation such as the 1934 Communications Act and the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Communications Act.

The US ruling elite has responded to the growth of social inequality over the past three decades by building up the repressive apparatus of the state—police agencies, prisons, spying operations, etc.—while

dismantling basic democratic protections. Now, divided from the vast majority of population by an unbridgeable social gulf, there is a distinct odor of dictatorship around America’s financial aristocracy and its two thoroughly bribed political parties.

The latest revelations about cell phone monitoring, when added to the long record of antidemocratic attacks carried out since the declaration of the “war on terror”—from the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp to the Obama administration’s assertion of the right to summarily execute anyone, including US citizens, anywhere in the world—provide chilling evidence of the real and growing threat of an American police state.

The only force capable of opposing these attacks on democratic rights is the working class, which must prepare politically to mobilize its vast social power in the struggle for a workers’ government and socialism.



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