

Compton, California subjected to massive secret aerial surveillance

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It has been recently revealed that for nine days in early 2012, as part of a test for an air surveillance system, a small Cessna aircraft patrolled the skies over the city of Compton, sending images of its residents' activities to the local sheriff's department.

Compton, located in Los Angeles County, is a poor working class community with a population of about 100,000 whose residents are predominately Hispanic and African-American.

The surveillance test was part of a larger effort by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to use aerial surveillance in the sprawling collection of communities it patrols. Around the same time, the sheriff was launching a similar aircraft observation program 80 miles north in the high desert city of Lancaster.

But while Lancaster's effort was publicized and debated at City Council meetings, the Sheriff's Department did not notify either Compton residents or their elected officials about the massive air surveillance that was being conducted.

The Compton surveillance program had gone mostly unknown until the Center for Investigative Reporting, an Emeryville-based journalism nonprofit, reported earlier this month that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had used high-powered cameras to watch over Compton.

In explaining why the police failed to notify anyone of this surveillance, the project's supervisor, LA County Sheriff Sgt. Doug Iketani, candidly admitted, "A lot of people do have a problem with the eye in the sky, the Big Brother, so in order to mitigate any of those kinds of complaints, we basically kept it pretty hush-hush."

Peter Bibring, an attorney for the ACLU of Southern California, said the lack of public notice and the far-flung nature of the videotaping troubled him. "So the

sheriffs were surveying the entire city," he said, "in the hope of catching very few."

This surveillance system was designed by Dayton, Ohio-based Persistent Surveillance Systems. Its President, Ross McNutt, indicated he had met with officials from both the sheriff's Compton station and headquarters to try to sell them on his Hawkeye II system, which he said provided sweeping images equivalent to what would come from 800 video cameras.

McNutt said the company's Cessna flew at 10,000 feet in a loop about four miles wide, with the cameras storing images from around the city, while beaming them to the sheriff's Compton office and air headquarters in Long Beach.

According to McNutt, although these cameras cannot read license plates or see faces, they do provide such a wealth of data that police, businesses and even private individuals can use them to help identify people and track their movements. "We literally watched all of Compton during the times that we were flying, so we could zoom in anywhere within the city of Compton and follow cars and see people," he said.

McNutt is a retired Air Force officer who previously helped design a similar system for the skies above Fallujah, the embattled city in Iraq. He hopes to win over officials in various cities by convincing them that cameras mounted on fixed-wing aircraft can provide far more useful intelligence than police helicopters, and can do so for less money.

According to the Persistent Surveillance Systems website, "PSS supports federal, state, local, and international law enforcement organizations with surveillance of troubled communities and major events. PSS provides Electro optical and IR surveillance systems that allow tracking of vehicles and people up to

a 25 square mile area. Dr. McNutt has led the development and deployment of these systems to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Dayton Police Departments, Los Angeles Sheriff Department, the U.S. Army at Ft. Leonard Wood, NAVAIR at Yuma Proving Grounds, and has performed wide-area surveillance operations for the DEA, El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), Customs and Border Protection, and a number of international customers.”

WSWS reporters spoke to several people in Compton about their thoughts and reactions to the Sheriff’s secret surveillance of the community. Robert Taylor, a 55-year-old disabled worker who is a former resident of Compton, said, “They want to make sure you’re not a criminal and they make you the criminal. I have been stopped by the police. They slam me on the ground—you look like this suspect, you look like that suspect. I guess the whole United States is now suspect to the government’s eyes.”

Keisha and Amber, who live in nearby Watts and regularly shop in Compton, voiced similar concerns. Keisha indicated that the aerial spying made her understand that she has no privacy and does not feel safe. “It’s like someone is watching me all the time. Just to know that they are spying on me is not a good feeling. I’m not comfortable.”

Amber added, “It sounds crazy but we have no privacy. It all makes me very uncomfortable. For someone to spy on us that’s crazy.” As to why this was done in secret, Amber added, “because if everyone knew, there would have been a problem. People would have been out here protesting and doing things about it.”

Michael T., a resident of Compton, also felt his privacy had been invaded. As to why the government was spying on Compton, he felt it was “to give the government more knowledge of what’s going on in the community. They’re trying to get some type of intelligence and knowledge on people in lower class and lower income communities. They want to get more knowledge about the people who live here and how to contain them, control them.”

Last year the Dayton, Ohio Police Department was interested in McNutt’s offer to fly 200 hours over the city for a home-town discount price of \$120,000. Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl, a supporter of McNutt’s efforts, proposed inviting the public to visit

the operations center to view the technology in action. “I want them to be worried that we’re watching,” Biehl said. “I want them to be worried that they never know when we’re overhead.”

Persistent Surveillance Systems’ proposed contract for Dayton was rejected, however, at least temporarily, as the vote to approve this contract coincided with the recent wave of revelations about the National Security Agency’s massive surveillance operations.

The testing out of various methods to conduct large-scale domestic surveillance in Compton and in cities throughout the country is an integral component of the escalating assault on democratic rights. These latest revelations involving massive aerial spying, 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, the government’s “right” to detain indefinitely US citizens, the Obama administration’s assertion of the “right” to summarily execute anyone, including US citizens, anywhere in the world, along with revelations of the vast NSA spying operations—provide further confirmation of the real and growing threat of an American police state.



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