

No details from New York police on X-ray surveillance vans

Sandy English
4 November 2015

Last month, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) and other civil rights organizations joined a suit against the New York Police Department (NYPD) filed by Pro Publica journalist Michael Grabbell seeking release of information about secret surveillance vans that the department is using around the city.

In January, a New York State Supreme Court judge ordered the NYPD to release documents about the deployment of the vans, their cost, and any policies and procedures the department has in regard to the vans. The city has appealed the decision, and little remains known about the number of vans, where they are used, and against what sorts of targets.

The vans, also known as ZBVs, come equipped with an x-ray technology called z-backscatter that enables viewers to detect organic material more precisely than conventional X-rays. The vans can see through clothing and other light barriers without the knowledge of those being scanned.

The technology was used in body scanning machines at airports by the US Transportation Security Administration until 2013 when they were removed because of public outcry over privacy.

The vans look like ordinary delivery vehicles. They are manufactured by American Science and Engineering (AS&E) and reputedly cost from \$729,000 to \$825,000. According to its website in 2010, AS&E has sold ZBVs around the world to agencies as far-reaching as the US military, NATO, the Thai Police, UK Customs, and New Zealand Customs.

The use of radiation emitted by ZBVs has raised health concerns. The European Union stopped using the z-backscatter technology at airports in 2012 because of passenger health concerns. Peter Rez of Arizona State University, an expert in radiation physics, told FoxNews.com that if a person walked next to the van as

it was scanning, “Then I would start getting worried.”

The NYPD’s endangerment of New Yorkers’ health is entirely in keeping with the violation of their democratic rights through the use of mass surveillance. The period since the terrorist attacks of 2001 have seen a dramatic increase in all manner of surveillance by the department.

This has included its anti-Muslim surveillance program in New York and New Jersey; its policy of stop-and-frisk, which over the last several years has created an electronic database of millions of predominantly minority working class youth; its ongoing plans for a Community Policing program; and its participation in the federally sponsored Strong Cities program. The latter two programs seek to cultivate networks of informants in working class neighborhoods, schools and cultural organizations.

The NYCLU noted in its recent brief that “technologies—from X-ray scanners to drones, automatic license plate readers that record license plates of cars passing by, and ‘Stingrays’ that spy on nearby cell phones by imitating cell phone towers—have brought rapid advances to law enforcement capacity to monitor citizens. Some of these new technologies have filtered in from the battlefields into the hands of local law enforcement with little notice to the public and with little oversight.”

New York Police Commissioner William Bratton, the appointee of the “progressive” Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio, refused in October to discuss the NYPD’s ZBVs: “Those are issues I’d prefer not to divulge to the public at this time. I will not talk about anything at all about this—it falls into the range of security and counterterrorism activity that we engage in.”

In the language of Bratton and the NYPD, “counterterrorism” includes state spying on all those

opposed to US government policies, including peaceful protesters. This was evidenced in Bratton's remarks in January in the aftermath of mass demonstrations against the refusal of a grand jury to indict the police killer of Staten Island resident Eric Garner. As he announced the formation of a special "counterterrorism" squad of 350 cops armed with machine guns and long rifles, he added that that the unit was "designed for dealing with events like our recent protests."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact