

Los Angeles Police Department set to deploy drones

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The Los Angeles Police Commission voted last week to approve the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles, known as drones, by the Los Angeles Police Department. The measure is being announced as a yearlong test and makes the LAPD the largest police department in the US to adopt drone technology. LAPD chief Charlie Beck spared no time announcing that two drones will be utilized within a month.

The drones will be allegedly deployed during missions undertaken by SWAT that have been deemed particularly dangerous. They will have cameras for reconnaissance purposes.

The vote was preceded by weeks of opposition and protests: LAPD held public meetings and requested feedback by the community. What transpired was a decisive rejection of the proposal: people shouted and jeered against the Commissioners' proposal. The department admitted that only 97 out of 1,675 emails received were in favor.

The decision is the culmination of a process that began openly in 2014, when the LAPD obtained two Draganflyer X6 drones from the Seattle police. At the time, the idea that drones would fly on civilian skies was heavily opposed by the public—concerned by the implications for privacy and democratic rights—and authorities decided to shelf the project.

Beck's recent statement contradicts his own words three years ago, when in light of much opposition he had stated: "I will not sacrifice public support for a piece of police equipment." Within a short span, the head of LAPD changed his tune and made clear that public opinion counts for nothing.

In 2012 the Department of Defense released a report to Congress, which exposed the US government's plan to deploy tens of thousands of drones across the country for the alleged purpose of "intelligence

gathering and law enforcement."

In the early stages of the debate in 2014, it was revealed that two years earlier the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had used a small Cessna aircraft to patrol the skies of Compton, a poor working class community in Los Angeles County, for nine consecutive days as part of a secret air surveillance system test.

Also in 2014, the police department in the city of San Jose, California became the first in the Bay Area to officially utilize a drone. Most disturbing was the case of North Dakota, which in 2015 authorized local police to mount weapons on drones.

As of this writing, at least some 350 state and local police, sheriff, fire, and emergency units in the US have acquired drones, as documented by a study earlier this year from Bard College.

This development is the logical consequence of two related processes that developed under the Obama administration to unprecedented levels: the militarization of the police and the growth of surveillance programs.

In 2014 it was reported that 8,000 local law enforcement agencies participated in the 1033 program of reutilizing military equipment for civilian purposes, acquiring a total of more than \$5 billion in military hardware.

After mass protests in 2015 over the police murder of Michael Brown Jr. were met with well-publicized use of military equipment in Ferguson, Missouri, the Obama administration attempted to disguise the federal role by limiting the type of military equipment that could be transferred to police departments.

Nonetheless, under the Obama administration police killings of civilians averaged more than three per day across the United States, and the Department of Justice

invariably sided with the police in every court case brought against police abuse.

Moreover, the massive spying programs implemented by the National Security Agency under Obama were never repealed, despite their illegal and unconstitutional character.

This police-state apparatus is now under the control of the Trump administration, a government of military brass, intelligence operatives and Wall Street financiers. Trump has openly appealed to white supremacists and neo-Nazis rioting in Charlottesville as well as to the police themselves.

In August, Trump rescinded Obama's executive order of 2015 which set a temporary limit on the type of military weaponry distributed to local police. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the action at a meeting of the Fraternal Order of Police in Nashville, Tennessee.

It is in this context that the ordinance approved in Los Angeles must be viewed. The deployment of surveillance drones has one clear target: a working population that must be suppressed. The ruling class is preparing to use surveillance and military repression against the social upheavals which will inevitably develop in response to increasing social inequality.

The drones deployed in Los Angeles are said to have no weapons, at least initially. They will be used to spy on the population, expand state powers, preempt situations of social unrest and assist the police and military in suppressing them.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that the LAPD won't follow the example of North Dakota and arm their drones, especially in consideration of the long history of police brutality, corruption and abuses in Los Angeles, from the 1951 Bloody Christmas to the paramilitary approach of Chief Daryl Gates in the 1980s to the infamous Rodney King beating.

California is the sixth largest economy in the world, with the highest supplemental poverty rate in the US after adjusting for cost of living. Los Angeles in particular has seen a sharp increase of 23 percent in homelessness last year. The poverty rate in the city is 18.7 percent, above the state's 16.4 percent, with South Los Angeles reaching a poverty rate of 43 percent.

As Wall Street celebrated the Dow Jones average breaking through the 23,000 mark last week, the working class faces low wages and ever-deeper

poverty, enforced by police repression and mass surveillance.



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