

Baltimore, Maryland approves measure allowing for police aerial surveillance

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On April 1 the Baltimore City Board of Estimates, which includes mayor Jack Young and city council president Brandon Scott, approved a program using planes equipped with high resolution cameras to fly over Baltimore for at least 40 hours per week. The massive spying operation, named Aerial Investigative Research, will be conducted by a private corporation, Persistent Surveillance Systems (PSS).

The program, which has since been temporarily halted on grounds of constitutionality by a federal court, was approved by the city at the request of Baltimore Police Department (BPD) commissioner Michael Harrison. If allowed to go forward, the program will last for an initial trial period of up to six months. The cameras mounted on the city's aircraft will generate a video record, which will be combined with existing ground cameras, license plate readers and other sensors, to provide the police with an ability to track an individual anywhere they go, at any place or time.

According to Bloomberg News , the aerial surveillance operation was originally implemented in secret by the BPD in January 2016. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, this operation was not disclosed even to the mayor of Baltimore at the time.

Earlier in the same month, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) released a report that the BPD had engaged in the widespread violation of constitutional rights, including unjustified stops and searches; arrests without proper cause; racial profiling; use of excessive force; sexual discrimination; and retaliation against actions protected by the First Amendment. Significantly, the DOJ's investigation did not devote a single word to the secret surveillance operation.

Ross McNutt, the founder of PSS, first developed the surveillance system on behalf of the Department of

Defense for use in war zones. The Air Force, where McNutt was serving at the time, began using a version of the system in Iraq in 2007. Later that year, McNutt retired from the Air Force and PSS opened for business. For a number of years his company made its pitch to sell its services to a number of police departments in cities with the highest crime levels in the US.

The April 2015 murder of Freddie Gray while in the custody of the Baltimore police—ruled a homicide in the autopsy report—sparked mass protests against the police. The response of all levels of government was to mobilize the repressive powers of the state. The governor mobilized 5,000 National Guardsmen along with armored vehicles used in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the mayor of Baltimore imposed a curfew on the city.

The surveillance firm viewed this as a perfect business opportunity. “We settled in on Baltimore because it was ready, it was willing, and it was just post-Freddie Gray,” McNutt noted in a recent interview with Bloomberg News.

Financing of the contract to renew the aerial surveillance is also significant. The cost for this trial run is not coming from public funds, but is being provided by Arnold Ventures, run by billionaire former hedge fund manager John D. Arnold, which has provided nearly \$500,000 to the project. The BPD's Harrison, in his request to the Board of Estimates, described Arnold Ventures as a “philanthropic organization.” Arnold Ventures' website states that the foundation is dedicated to “correcting system failures through evidence-based solutions.”

In a statement to the *Sun*, a representative of Arnold Ventures says: “We personally provided financial support for the aerial surveillance tool being piloted in

Baltimore. As a society, we should seek to understand whether these technologies yield significant benefits, while carefully weighing any such benefits against corresponding tradeoffs to privacy.”

In responding to the grant provider’s mealy-mouthed comment about the “benefits” of surveillance and the “tradeoffs to privacy,” one recalls the line in the 1958 film *Touch of Evil*: “A police officer’s job is only easy in a police state.”

Corruption is a theme throughout Arnold’s career. According to the *Sun*, “[Arnold] made his fortune at Enron before the energy company imploded. ... He was one of the company’s top traders and among 100 executives who received large bonuses-his was reportedly \$8 million-a year before the company went bankrupt.” Enron, the massive energy conglomerate, filed for bankruptcy in 2001 following the revelation that the company owed billions in debt, which it had hid through various evasive and illegal tax schemes.

That the “philanthropy” of Arnold Ventures is connected to such swindling only demonstrates the anti-democratic character of the entire project.

Baltimore has had in excess of 300 murders in each of the last five years, placing it among the top five American cities for homicides per capita. This is just the most visible indicator of a city in a condition of immense social deterioration. According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty rate in Baltimore for 2018 was 18.9 percent, compared to 11.8 percent for the entire US. According to a 2014 study, the city’s child poverty rate was a staggering 32.2 percent.

Unable to meet the basic needs of a poverty-stricken population, capitalist governments across the world are turning to more “innovative” forms of rule, of an anti-democratic and authoritarian character.



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