

NYPD marks Labor Day by sending drones to monitor backyard parties

Daniel de Vries
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The New York Police Department is deploying drones to monitor a wide range of activities in New York City over the Labor Day holiday weekend, from large public festivals to private parties, officials said at a press conference in Brooklyn on Thursday.

Framed as a public safety measure related to the West Indian Day parade and Labor Day celebrations, the prospects of police drones hovering over backyard barbecues marks a shocking step in the expansion of the mass surveillance state.

Highlighting the security measures in place this weekend, Kaz Daughtry, an assistant commissioner of the NYPD, outlined the immediate plans. “The drones are going to be responding to non-priority calls and priority calls,” he said. “For example, if we have any 311 calls on our non-emergency line, where if a caller states there is a large crowd, a large party in the backyard, we’re going to be utilizing our assets to go up, go check on the party to make sure if the call is founded or not.”

This unilateral expansion of drone use is blatantly illegal. In 2020, the City Council passed the Public Oversight of Surveillance Technology Act, requiring the police department to provide 90-day notice for public comment on any new uses of surveillance technology, including drones. No such notice has been issued for the planned surveillance.

The new drone deployment comes in the wake of New York City Mayor Eric Adams’ visit to Israel, in which he toured the National Police Academy and met with security officials to discuss technology. Accompanied on the trip by NYPD officials, Adams praised the Israeli police for how they “strategically and successfully deal with a large crowd.”

He reported potentially new applications of drones picked up from the Israeli police forces, including

coupling drones with motorcycles. “I’ve been leaning into how we could appropriately use drones, and they had great technology on using drones for early detection,” he commented.

Such statements, given Israel’s illegal occupation and brutal suppression of the Palestinian population, have an ominous character. The criminal methods of oppression and the latest technological weapons used by Israel are seen as a model for controlling the population in the most populous city in the United States.

There is deep symbolic significance in the fact that the Adams administration announced the drone surveillance on Labor Day weekend. Ultimately, the buildup of technological and other forces of repression is aimed at preparing for confrontations with the working class.

The city’s ruling elite, represented in New York by the former cop Adams, is acutely aware of the explosive character of social relations in the city, where the wealth of Wall Street collides with a working class being pushed into confrontation by conditions of life that are becoming impossible. There is immense anger, amplified by the experience of the pandemic, over the cost of housing, transportation, childcare and other necessities, on the one hand, and an economic and political setup that functions to protect the fortunes of a tiny elite, on the other.

At the city as well as the national level, the buildup of the security apparatus has accelerated even as funding for social programs has been slashed and modest social measures to provide a safety net have been abandoned following the declared end to the pandemic. The Biden administration has mobilized billions for the war against Russia in Ukraine, while some of the same technologies used on the battlefield are deployed

against the working class at home.

The NYPD itself rivals armies of many large countries in terms of budget and headcount. The \$5.6 billion annual budget is larger than military spending in Vietnam, South Africa and Greece. Covering just over 300 square miles of land, New York City has 35,000 uniformed police officers and 15,000 additional civilian police employees.

The NYPD recently increased its stockpile of advanced drones equipped with thermal imaging and night vision, which can break through windows and push open door. These same Lemur 2 quad-copters are used in the Ukraine War. The new purchases are on top of at least 19 NYPD drones reported publicly last year, and hundreds of thousands of dollars more in other unspecified drone-related purchases.

Beyond drones, the NYPD operates a vast spying apparatus, including a well-funded system for monitoring social media activity. Since Adams took office more than a year-and-a-half ago, the city has spent \$4.3 million on Dataminr, a social media monitoring program that has been used by the agency to track activists involved in protests against police violence. This represents a major increase compared to the cumulative \$7 million allocated over the previous five-year period. The NYPD also inked a smaller deal for \$165,000 with a company that scans websites to compile information on investigative targets.

This digital spying builds on a long history of surveillance on communities in New York City and beyond, most notably an anti-Muslim spying operation that extended well beyond the city and even national borders.

The situation in New York City, led by the law-and-order Democrat Adams, is indicative of a broader process around the country. While the NYPD's drone program represents one of the largest and most aggressive, over 1,400 police departments across the country are already using drones, many of them initially in a "first responder" capacity.

It is implausible that drone use by the police department in New York or elsewhere will stop at eavesdropping on noisy parties. A report by the ACLU on police use of drones nationally, published less than a week before the NYPD's announcement, noted grave concerns over the growth of drone use by police, including the "very real prospect that... drones become

so common and routine that without strong privacy protections we end up with the functional equivalent of a mass surveillance regime in the skies."

In New York, the increased deployment of spying technology comes amid a long history of the police department's flagrant disregard for legal constraints on its power. In July, New York City reached a \$13.7 million settlement in connection with violent police rampages during the 2020 protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd. Significantly, the NYPD refused to admit wrongdoing and instead paid out a modest sum to the victims of police beatings and false arrests.

The NYPD's actions also unfold in a national context where the mass spying apparatus is expanding. The *Intercept* recently revealed the FBI has amassed a DNA database of 21.7 million people, roughly seven percent of the population of the US. The Biden administration has led a rapid expansion of the program and is requesting a doubling of the funds for the program next year.

This scurry by law enforcement agencies to add drones and other tools of repression reveals not the stability of the capitalist state, but its extreme fragility. The ruling class feels itself besieged, hence the need to expand its arsenal with the latest technology. But there aren't enough drones in the world to counter the working class when it begins to move, armed with a socialist program and leadership.



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