

Mamdani silent on NYPD surveillance of New York City public housing tenants

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On August 6, Brooklyn Defender Services and the civil rights law firm Beldock Levine & Hoffman LLP sued New York City, the New York Police Department and NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch on behalf of tenant associations at the Langston Hughes Houses and Samuel Tilden Houses, challenging the city's covert integration of public housing security cameras into the NYPD's Domain Awareness System (DAS).

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has not commented on the suit, much less call a halt to the program. Mamdani's silence is the third major attack by his administration in a single month on the working class, particularly its poorest and most vulnerable sections.

The Big Apple Connect initiative, launched in 2022 under right-wing Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, was ostensibly intended to provide free broadband to hundreds of thousands of public housing residents. Under its guise, the city used the new internet infrastructure to give the NYPD real-time access to cameras at roughly two dozen NYCHA buildings. The department plans to expand the program to nearly 18,000 cameras across 119 developments.

Where cameras have been connected, the NYPD can stream footage from hallways, lobbies and residential grounds directly into the Domain Awareness System. DAS is a massive real-time surveillance and data fusion hub developed jointly with Microsoft. By routing live feeds through Big Apple Connect, the NYPD streams footage from hallways, lobbies and residential grounds into the system. Once integrated, the video feeds into pattern-matching software, automated alerts and facial recognition tools, allowing police to track movements and build individual profiles without warrants or public oversight. DAS uses automated analytics to search footage by clothing color, body type, bags or vehicle attributes. Still images and clips may be submitted to the NYPD's Facial Identification Section.

The lawsuit accuses the city and NYPD of systematically violating municipal transparency and anti-discrimination mandates. It alleges the NYPD breached the Public Oversight of Surveillance Technology (POST) Act by covertly expanding live-stream surveillance through Big Apple Connect without

the required Impact and Use Policy or public comment period. The city and NYPD are also violating Local Law 40 by failing to publish their inter-agency agreement with NYCHA. The suit further asserts that continuous monitoring of NYCHA properties (whose residents are roughly 88 percent black and Latino) constitutes unlawful bias-based profiling and violates local protections against unreasonable searches.

Beyond municipal violations, the petition challenges the program under the New York state and federal constitutions. Constant, indiscriminate surveillance infringes Fourth Amendment and state constitutional protections against warrantless searches where tenants have a reasonable expectation of privacy. It also contends that hyper-surveilling low-income minority communities violates the Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment and the state constitution, while chilling residents' First Amendment rights to free expression, assembly and association.

In preserving this system, the Mamdani administration and billionaire heiress Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch are strengthening the same architecture of warrantless surveillance and state repression that the Trump administration is deploying through ICE.

Mamdani and the NYPD are continuing a decades-long effort, primarily by the Democratic Party, to police and suppress the poorest sections. Tenant advocates have labeled the NYCHA program a "digital stop-and-frisk," after the NYPD's notorious campaign of profiling, stopping and searching predominantly black and Latino youth while recording their names, addresses and other personal information in a police database.

By 2010, the NYPD had carried out nearly 3 million stops since 2004. Almost nine out of 10 resulted in neither an arrest nor a summons. A state law sponsored by then-Assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries, now House minority leader, and then-State Senator Eric Adams prohibited police from retaining the names and addresses of people stopped and released without further legal action.

The NYPD, however, continues to maintain its Criminal Group Database, a centralized registry for tracking suspected gang members. Individuals can be entered without arrest, conviction or judicial oversight, based on criteria such as social

media posts, clothing colors or proximity in public housing. Prior to taking office, Mamdani criticized the database, but he has left it intact as mayor.

The NYCHA program revives stop-and-frisk at a more dangerous level. *New York Focus*, which uncovered the plans, reported on city council hearings where Michal Gross, a public defender at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, testified that police already use NYCHA footage for purposes other than responding to crimes: “surveilling youth via NYCHA video, watching who they spend time with, who their friends are, and even documenting how they spend time with their own family members.”

Roughly 330,000 of the poorest New Yorkers live in NYCHA public housing, where rents remain far below the average asking price of more than \$4,000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. Without public housing, many would face vastly higher housing costs or homelessness. This layer of the working class is being directly squeezed by the Trump Administration: an estimated tens of thousands of NYCHA residents are directly affected by the federal SNAP cuts and expanded work rules.

Decades of chronic disinvestment have left the aging housing stock with an estimated \$78 billion capital repair backlog. Residents endure dangerous conditions: toxic mold from deteriorated plumbing, winter heat and hot water outages, persistent elevator breakdowns, lead paint hazards and deteriorating facades. Mamdani’s Block-by-Block housing program allocates only \$5.6 billion to NYCHA over five years, less than one-thirteenth of the authority’s estimated \$78 billion capital repair backlog.

The class character of the NYCHA surveillance program was highlighted this week when Mamdani backed proposed legislation forbidding “places of public accommodation” from using biometric recognition to identify customers. The bill, sponsored by DSA council member Shahana Hanif, targets facial recognition used by Trump ally James Dolan, the billionaire owner of the Knicks and Madison Square Garden, to track and expel attorneys from firms involved in litigation against MSG.

Significantly, the proposed legislation would leave the NYPD’s own use of facial recognition untouched. It expressly exempts the collection, storage, sharing and use of biometric information by government agencies. Police could therefore apply facial recognition to footage obtained from MSG or other private camera systems, even though the businesses themselves would be prohibited from doing so.

While MSG’s use of facial recognition at its venues is reactionary and must be opposed, Mamdani’s defense of MSG shareholders over working people in NYCHA—who could scarcely afford a Knicks ticket—is telling. It demonstrates that the class orientation of the DSA is to the NYPD, the Trump administration, and a capitalist oligarchy which is increasingly terrified of any eruption of mass dissent.

Significantly, Hanif and the three other members of the DSA on the city council have remained silent on the suit against the city and on the integration of Big Apple Connect with DAS, although two of them, Alexa Avilés and Chi Ossé, are co-sponsors of the bill to restrict biometric surveillance at private firms, and the fourth, Tiffany Cabán, has sponsored a companion law, which bars landlords and residential building owners from installing or using biometric recognition technology on tenants and guests.

Mamdani’s silence on the NYCHA spying is part of a rapid escalation in his war against the working class. On August 7, after the Supreme Court upheld the revocation of Temporary Protected Status for some 350,000 Haitians, Mamdani announced Haitian city employees would be terminated—directly enforcing the fascistic anti-immigrant machinery of an administration whose leader has called Haiti a “shithole country” and accused Haitian immigrants of eating pets. He made no call for protests, strikes or legal challenges, instead directing appeals to Trump himself, with whom he has met twice in the White House and boasted of a “partnership.”

This came days after he reversed his pledge to support a \$10,000 bonus for paraprofessional school aides—among the city’s most exploited workers, starting at \$33,222—invoking the anti-labor Taylor Law to block the measure, in capitulation to Wall Street and the corporate media.

In the case of the Haitian workers, as with NYCHA surveillance, Mamdani acts as a direct instrument of the capitalist state’s repressive apparatus, stripping workers of their livelihoods and legal right to remain, delivering them to a deportation regime that may send them back to gang violence and possible death in Haiti.

These actions are not aberrations but the logical culmination of Mamdani’s record since taking office: he has slashed school and homeless programs, deferred city pension contributions, reneged on free bus service, and created a commission to prepare permanent austerity.

This is the DSA in power. Mamdani and the DSA are not “socialists” who have compromised, but a faction of the Democratic Party whose function is to channel working-class opposition back into the capitalist state, block an independent political movement of the working class, and directly implement state repression against it. Social tensions are growing in America’s largest and most unequal city every day and must invariably find an outlet. The mass surveillance of NYCHA residents is a critical part of the state’s preparations to contain the inevitable eruption of social opposition.



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