

The Stench of the Police State at US Airports

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As tens of millions of Americans travel during the busy Thanksgiving holiday weekend, they will come face to face with the new regime instituted by the federal Transportation Security Administration. More than 70 major airports have installed full-body scanners, where randomly selected passengers are compelled to undergo the electronic equivalent of a strip search. Travelers who decline that scan will be subjected instead to an extremely invasive body search that includes an open-palm patdown of the genital area.

There are already reports of gross invasions of privacy and abuse of passengers. A flight attendant was forced to show her prosthetic breast during a patdown. An 8-year-old boy was forced to remove his shirt in Salt Lake City, although children under 12 are supposedly not subject to the intensified searches. A retired special education teacher from Lansing, Michigan was humiliated and left covered with his own urine after a TSA screener broke the seal on his urostomy bag while patting him down.

Many passengers have reacted to the patdowns as a form of sexual molestation. The depth of popular hostility is demonstrated by the informal boycott of the body scanners called for Wednesday, November 24, traditionally the busiest day of the year at airports. TSA director John Pistole was so concerned about the prospective boycott that he issued an appeal Monday against it, claiming it would “tie up people who want to go home and see their loved ones.”

The new measures, introduced by the TSA November 1, constitute an assault on core constitutional rights. The random full-body scans and/or patdowns are a systematic, across-the-board violation of the Fourth Amendment prohibition on unreasonable searches and seizures in which all those who are traveling are treated as potential terrorist threats.

Such methods have a logic of their own. If it is necessary to search any passenger on a plane in the most intrusive manner possible, similar justifications will be found for other forms of mass transportation—trains, buses, subways—as well as other venues where large numbers of people congregate, including malls, movie theaters, or any sizeable workplace. The result is the creation of a police-state environment for the entire society.

Pistole cited the attempt by a Nigerian with explosives in his underwear to try to bring down an Amsterdam-to-Detroit flight last Christmas as a reason for the new search regime. Such justifications are a fraud. The entire “war on terror,” from the initial 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 to the most recent scare over cargo shipments from Yemen, is characterized by the unexplained and highly suspicious role of the American security apparatus, which has repeatedly acted in a fashion that suggests that it is promoting and facilitating terrorist provocations—which are then utilized to promote the military and foreign policy goals of American imperialism—rather than preventing them.

For example, the “underwear bomber,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was allowed to board the flight despite the efforts of his father, a prominent Nigerian businessman, to tip off US authorities about his son’s potential connections to Islamic terrorists. The father visited the US embassy in Abuja, and a report was filed with the Department of State in Washington. This supposedly did not trigger an alert, despite the fact that US intelligence had uncovered reports of a Yemen-based terrorist plot using a Nigerian whose name might be “Umar Farouk.” The results of the affair have been twofold: a major increase in US military/intelligence operations in Yemen, and now the intensified domestic security screening at US airports.

None of the increasingly absurd and outrageous procedures instituted at airports have anything to do with making the population more “secure.” Rather, they are part of a massive increase in the power of the security apparatus, the framework of a police state in the US. From 9/11 on, first under Bush, now under Obama, the “war on terror” has been used as a catch-all justification for expanding domestic spying; instituting indefinite detention without charges; justifying executive assassination of anyone around the world, including US citizens; and employing torture. The climate of fear and intimidation cultivated at the borders and at the airports is part of this.

The response of the Obama administration to widespread complaints about the new procedures has been to act as though the White House was powerless to stop an agency whose director Obama himself appointed only a few months ago. Obama declared, “TSA in consultation with counterterrorism experts have indicated to me that the procedures that they have been putting in place are the only ones right now that they consider to be effective against the kind of threat that we saw in the Christmas Day bombing.”

Congressional Republicans, for their part, sought to exploit the popular hostility to the patdown searches by advocating extensive racial profiling at airports as an alternative. It was “political correctness” to put grandmothers, toddlers and the disabled through intensive screening, they argued, suggesting that Israeli-style methods of singling out target groups—young, non-white men, for example—should be employed instead. This avowedly racist approach leads to the same result as Obama’s: giving a green light to the unaccountable bureaucrats of TSA.

Both big business parties, Democrats and Republicans, are committed to expanding the power of the capitalist state, in its most overtly repressive form, the “armed bodies of men,” in Marxist terms. Ten years of bloody warfare since 9/11 have brought about an increasing brutalization of American society itself, as the American government now brings home the methods of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, violence and humiliation, for use against the American population.

These police-state methods are not directed against “terrorism,” but at any opposition to the increasingly unpopular policies of the financial aristocracy. The more farsighted sections of the ruling class understand very well that their policies of impoverishing the working class and ripping up social programs will lead to mass opposition, for which they have no answer but mass repression.

Moreover, police-state measures at home are a critical component of the preparation for new wars and imperialist adventures abroad. Each “terror scare” is tied to the promotion of the interests of American imperialism in key regions of the world, generally those that sit on top of vast quantities of oil and gas or straddle critical shipping routes.

All this is not to say that there is no danger of terrorist incidents. However, the principal source of this danger is the American government itself, which through its actions helps foment opposition and deep anger in the most far-reaching areas of the world. Despite the incessant panic mongering over terrorism, no one in the political establishment or media suggests the most immediate step necessary to dealing with the danger—putting an end to the bloody US wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the final analysis, the increasing reliance of the US ruling elite on police-state methods, abroad and at home, demonstrates the impossibility of combining imperialism and democracy. American society is being ripped apart by profound social contradictions. Never has the gulf been so wide between the enormous wealth of the privileged elite, and increasing misery for the broad masses of the population.

The defense of democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle to mobilize working people to defend their social rights, to jobs, decent living standards and public services. This requires the building of a mass revolutionary party of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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