

Surveillance law lays basis for political police in France

Anthony Torres
28 April 2015

The National Assembly is currently debating a digital surveillance bill, scheduled for a vote on May 5, which would legalize mass spying and data retention practices by French intelligence agencies.

The bill would give intelligence services access to data held by telecommunications firms, social networking sites such as Facebook, and Internet service providers. Agents could install “black boxes” in all these locations to automatically gather data, even if they do not have any precise target for surveillance. Intelligence services will also have the capacity to spy on all cell phone calls close to their installations and also to electronically trace any person’s physical location.

The bill claims its aims are “the prevention of organized crime,” “essential foreign policy interests,” and even “vital economic and scientific interests.”

“Our country is the last Western democracy which has not given itself a legal framework overseeing the practices of the intelligence services,” said Jean-Jacques Urvoas, the PS deputy and president of the legislative committee at the Assembly that drafted the bill.

The central purpose of the bill, however, is to protect and massively expand illegal mass spying on the population of France and of the world. Mass spying has been undertaken by France and all the other imperialist powers well before the law was drafted, as revealed by Edward Snowden. The right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* bluntly wrote that the bill’s purpose was to “legalize currently illegal practices by intelligence agents, so as to protect them.”

The bill takes the power for mass surveillance from the judiciary and hands it over directly to the executive, with targets selected either by the prime minister or by an official he has delegated for this purpose. The bill

specifies that control of surveillance practices will rest with a National Control Commission (CNCTR) composed of two deputies, two senators, two judges, and a “person selected for knowledge of electronic communication.”

The Socialist Party’s (PS) bill was drafted ostensibly in response to the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* weekly in January. Since then, sections of the army, the intelligence and the police forces have reportedly intensified pressure to legitimize mass spying on electronic data.

After the adoption of military and anti-terrorist bills, expanding the intelligence agencies’ powers, President François Hollande is making a major step forward in erecting the infrastructure of a police state. While claiming they are fighting Islamist terrorism, which NATO and French imperialism cynically uses as proxy forces for wars in Libya and Syria, he is attacking democratic rights and targeting all opposition to the ruling class’s reactionary agenda of austerity and war.

Speaking for the French state and as a defender of the surveillance law, conservative deputy Alain Marsaud, a former judge and anti-terrorist official at the Paris prosecutor’s office in the 1980s, sharply warned of enormous dangers posed by the law.

“This law does not guarantee enough control,” he said. “The capacity for intrusion it gives is enormous. Our life will not be the same before and after, because everything we say will be watched. Today, this power rests with Prime Minister Manuel Valls. I do not doubt that he will use it well. But the law will last and fall into other hands. This law can permit the installation of a political police the likes of which we have never seen.”

French democracy is already in a deep crisis, and the confidence that Marsaud claims to place in the

democratic sentiments of Valls and of the PS is entirely misplaced. As it imposes policies of war and austerity that have no popular support, the PS is desperately afraid of an eruption of social struggles in the working class that could overwhelm the union bureaucracies and the PS' pseudo-left political satellites.

It is above all against this risk that French intelligence, which already has a long tradition of spying aimed at internal targets designed to monitor and suppress social opposition, is laying the basis of a police state.

Le Monde briefly referred in an article on the law to the historical precedents and dangers posed by the exorbitant powers to be granted to the security services. It warned, “‘To prevent the abuse of power,’ wrote Montesquieu, ‘government must be disposed so that power is counterbalanced by power.’ The Fourth Republic did not take that into account during the Algerian war, and it died as a result.”

The reference to the fall of France's Fourth Republic in 1958 points to the social and political content of the current push to reinforce intelligence powers. In ruling circles, discussions are being held about periods of history when sections of the French army intervened to suspend legality and to torture and assassinate opponents of the policies of French imperialism.

The Fourth Republic fell after a coup d'etat that brought General Charles de Gaulle to power in the middle of the Algerian war for independence against France. The coup rested on an alliance between the defenders of France's colonial empire, veterans' associations, and far-right circles inside the army. They planned to capture Lyon and arms factories in nearby St Etienne, and organize a mass landing in France of French colonists from Algeria, overseen and directed by right-wing parachute regiments.

In the event, the social-democratic government of Guy Mollet decided to cede power to De Gaulle shortly after the first operations of the projected coup were launched. At the time, intelligence services and parachute regiments were arresting, torturing and killing hundreds of thousands of Algerians and also French citizens opposed to French rule in Algeria.

Parachutists arrested and tortured Henri Alleg, who was subsequently condemned to 10 years in prison, and Maurice Audin, who died during his interrogation, in 1957. Both were members of the Algerian Communist

Party.

The current law being advanced by Hollande and Valls, appealing to the political descendants of these murderous forces, is a warning to the working class. The French security services are now arming themselves with a surveillance apparatus that the parachutists in Algiers, or the Milice of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, could not even have dreamed of.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact