

# **THE WORKER**

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## **Employer Surveillance of Workers**

Surveillance of employees at workplaces across the country is escalating. While conditions of work are already taking way more from workers than many want to give, the increasing likelihood – at home or any other type of work environment – of being put under surveillance by an employer delivers a gut-punch that further strips workers of dignity and harms their ability to collectively organize. As long ago as 1993 in Geneva, the UN's International Labor Organization published a study which showed such violations of workers' privacy extended from the factory floor to office workers and professionals, and was most prevalent in the United States.

This practice is an obvious violation of workers' rights to privacy and freedom of conscience. Whether performed secretly or with employees' knowledge, encroaching on the experience of the workers in this way is unconscionable. Workers contract with their employers to sell their labor power for a fixed period of time; they do not contract to submit every thought and deed to the approval of the boss.

Today, there is a surge of rapidly increasing capital investments in and development of new software and other technology for large and small scale data collection on employees. This is leading to a proliferation of methods for secretly micromanaging worker performance and watching and recording both personal and work-related behaviors. The growing investment in and use of these products shows that the capitalist class is continuing, without let-up, its savage attacks against labor law and all the rights of the working people. The growing trend of surveillance of workers constitutes a dramatic worsening of ongoing attacks on our democratic rights. And it is taking place on top of a massive build up of the repressive apparatus

of the state already started in the name of "the war against terrorism."

The workers have long and bitter experience in what happens when they express ideas or organize themselves in ways not sanctioned by the boss. Every year thousands of workers are fired from their jobs simply for raising the issue of unionization with fellow employees. Surveillance is also used to suppress the political opinions of workers and prevent political discussion from unfolding at the workplace, even (or especially) in times of crisis, such as today when employers demand that workers must "Stand with Ukraine!" The threat and reality of job loss also hangs over the heads of people whose lifestyle choices don't measure up to their employer's definition of what is acceptable.

The rights to privacy, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience are pillars of any system that claims to guarantee the rule of the majority. But, in the law and practice of our country, these rights are regularly denied to the workers.

The capitalist system divides society into a class of capitalists, who monopolize the economic lifeline of society and have everything at their command, and the propertyless mass of workers, who have nothing. Under this system, slogans of bourgeois democracy about "rights" and "equality" end up as nothing more than paper promises. In its decisions the Supreme Court openly admits this. For example, Clarence Thomas writes: "Government cannot make us equal; it can only recognize, respect and protect us as equal before the law." Of course, what Thomas fails to mention is that the cornerstone of the law is to "recognize, respect and protect" the "rights" and privileges of capitalist private ownership of the means of production. The promise of "equality for individuals before the law" means very little for the vast majority of Americans who are born into a society based on social,

economic and political inequality. It means particularly little for the working class – that class which is deprived of all property in the means of production and hence, in order to live, is forced to sell itself day in and day out to the capitalist exploiters.

In our country, under continuous pressure from the workers to claim their rights, there have been certain minimum standards and protections for the workers recognised in law - including health and safety laws, laws guarantying the right to unionize, laws limiting overtime, etc. These victories of class struggle have created tremendously positive changes, but they are extensively violated in practice. On the one hand, to exercise these rights the workers face an uphill battle brought on by the constant necessity to organize and reassert them. On the other hand, the state routinely refuses to punish capitalists who violate the laws on the books which are supposed to protect the rights of workers.

Moreover, contemporary bourgeois political science is backtracking even further and resurrecting feudal theories which justify the wielding of absolute power by the ruling elite.

In the face of these conditions, the revisionist and opportunist political forces suggest that capitalist attacks on democratic rights can be

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# Surveillance of Workers

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stopped through various “legislative and electoral remedies;” that is, that the masses of people should rely on the Democratic or Republican party politicians to “work together” to initiate new legislation which will restore lost rights. This program is in line with the general outlook of the revisionists and opportunists who maintain that capitalist “democracy,” as it exists in the U.S., is the best possible political system which through the constitutional system of “checks and balances,” through Congressional lobbying and electioneering, affords the masses the opportunity to redress their grievances and defend their rights.

So too, whenever the repressive arm of the capitalist state attacks the rights of the peoples, the opportunists tell the workers, the oppressed minorities and others that the very state which oppresses and represses them can be relied on to defend democratic rights.

The Workers Party has a fundamentally different view and program of action. The laws and legal system of society are a reflection of the class relations which form the real base of any society; the laws define the rights of the various classes, defending the rule of the dominant class while restricting the rights of the oppressed classes and denying the oppressed the means and methods necessary to struggle against their oppression and exploitation. In the U.S., the legal system, as well as the entire governmental machine, is in the hands of the capitalist class. Capitalist “democracy” while promising political liberties and equal rights to the workers in theory, always denies these rights in practice. Thus, for example, while the black people were allegedly guaranteed equal rights since the time of the Civil War, everyone knows that systematic racial discrimination, segregation, police terror, national oppression and super-exploitation are imposed on them. Similarly, while the capitalists never stop boasting about the exist-

ence of such rights as freedom of speech and freedom of association, political protesters are regularly beaten and arrested for exercising these rights. Despite the formal promises about “democracy” and “equal rights,” the reality is that the capitalist government acts in the most arbitrary and dictatorial ways to deny the rights of the workers and to suppress our just struggles.

Destroying the monopoly of the political power in the hands of the exploiting minority is the immediate step needed for defending our hard won democratic rights, realizing the benefits of those rights in practice, and opening political space for the urgently needed revolutionary transformations.

Throughout our history, the American working class and people have had to wage continual and unrelenting mass struggles in order to force the capitalists and their government to implement any of the promised rights and freedoms of their system. In the 1960's and 70's tens of millions of people had to come into the streets just to eliminate some of the most blatant features of the apartheid-style segregation imposed on the black masses by temporarily breaking through the ruling class chokehold on decision-making authority – thereby forcing the state to abolish Jim Crow laws that were previously used to criminalize the black masses and the “heretics” that supported them. Tens of millions had to wage struggle after struggle to win the right to divorce, abortion and just to get the question of equal rights for women discussed by the capitalist government. Throughout our history, all the victories for democracy – whether on the front of the workers organizing themselves into trade unions, on the front of opposition to militarism and imperialist war, on the question of the rights of the national minorities and women, etc., etc. – have come as a result of a nation-wide political movement of the working people **against the will, the laws and government**

**of the capitalists.** And what is more, every democratic reform, which has been won at the expense of so much struggle and sacrifice by the masses, has always been implemented by the capitalist government in the most limited, narrow and restricted way so that the working people must continually wage new struggles to defend democratic liberties and to demand their realization in practice.

The real issue was and still is to create space in which the interests of the people can be sorted out and so organized independent political expression can be given to their profound revolutionary aspirations. The real issue was and still is to insist on going beyond the mere formal declaration of “political equality” and “universal rights” or “civil liberties”; to instead define the MEANS capable of guaranteeing in practice the rights of the people and the sovereignty of the people. A cherished lesson of our past victories is that whenever we brought to center-stage a politics organized independent of and in opposition to our own ruling class and its two political parties, whenever we developed a practical program of action which enabled people to participate in it, we won great victories.

The root problem remains the fact that it is the capitalist class which controls the government. The capitalists naturally want to deny equal rights to the working people and to restrict our struggles. The capitalists restrict such political liberties as the right to privacy and the right to strike precisely in order to suppress the struggles of the working masses against capitalist exploitation and oppression. As long as the capitalists control the government they will use it to defend their privileges and their property rights – their right to exploit and oppress the vast majority. Obviously, equal rights for the working people can only lead to eliminating the rule of the capitalists as well as the exploitation of man by man.