Britain's Police Federation forces shutdown of Internet web site

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Earlier this month the Police Federation of Britain forced the shutdown of the "Portia" web site, which champions the cases of those said to be wrongfully imprisoned in the UK. The focus for the action was Portia's hosting of the Eddie Gilfoyle Campaign's story entitled "Eddie Gilfoyle is Innocent".

Gilfoyle was convicted in 1993 of killing his wife. Last year the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) found the conviction was unsatisfactory. The case has been referred back to the Court of Criminal Appeal.

Gilfoyle's trial and imprisonment were the subject of a Channel 4 "Trial and Error" TV documentary, which provoked a civil action by the Police Federation against its makers. The closure of the Portia site is the latest move by the Police Federation's solicitors against those fighting for Gilfoyle's freedom.

Portia say they received a telephone call on Wednesday February 9 from "Webgenie Internet LTD", the Internet service provider (ISP) hosting their web site. A spokesman for the ISP said "they had suspended the site the previous day after a threatening letter from Russell, Jones and Walker, lawyers acting for the Police Federation." Webgenie Internet was told that the Police Federation had begun legal action against the makers of the "Trial and Error" programme "which featured the case of Eddie Gilfoyle." The Police Federation lawyers said it was illegal in Britain to publicise the subject of a pending action.

They demanded that the "Eddie Gilfoyle is Innocent" article be removed and a full apology be displayed. The letter carried threats as to what would happen if the ISP did not comply.

The spokesman for Webgenie Internet said they were a small business of just 20 people and could not fight the Police Federation, a large, powerful organisation that had millions of pounds at their disposal. He told the web site they were sympathetic and regretted taking the action, but had nevertheless decided to suspend the "Portia" site.

With this legal threat, the Police Federation have effectively censored information on Gilfoyle's case and a host of other alleged miscarriages of justice that are featured on the Portia site. Those, who have used the Portia site to campaign in defense of people they believe to have been victimised, have been deprived of their rights of free speech.

Many other web sites in Britain have proclaimed Gilfoyle's innocence and may be subject to similar threats and censorship. Moreover, the action could set a precedent for similar moves against those campaigning against other injustices.

A spokesman for the Eddie Gilfoyle campaign told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "This tactic by the Police Federation brings into question the whole democratic process and the right to free speech... It is the thin end of the wedge and could affect the basic civil rights of us all."

Gilfoyle's sister, Sue Caddick, said, "It's ridiculous. We were publishing the findings of the police themselves. The Police Complaints Authority had commissioned an internal inquiry by the Lancashire Police, which uncovered fresh evidence of Eddie's innocence. But the Appeals Court has refused to hear this evidence. Now something that has been on the public record for some time is deemed to be subjudice. In future the police could use the convening of an internal inquiry or a disciplinary hearing to declare anyone fighting for justice in breach of the law."

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