

Toronto police suspend campaign targeting "anti-cop" politicians

Threat to democratic rights remains

Keith Jones
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A public outcry and the threat of legal sanctions have compelled the Toronto Police Association to suspend Operation True Blue—a campaign to raise funds from the public to bankroll the Association's efforts to unseat "anti-police" politicians.

But Police Association leaders are vowing that theirs is only a temporary retreat. They continue to insist police have every right to solicit funds for political campaigns and to target those who criticize police conduct or refuse to back calls for increased police powers and funding. The Association has initiated legal action to have the courts strike down a recently-adopted Toronto Police Services Board by-law that prohibits the police union from soliciting funds for its political campaigns.

In an apparent quid pro quo for the Association suspending its fundraising campaign, Toronto Police Chief David Boothby has dropped the misconduct charges he laid against police union leaders for defying his and the Services Board's orders to end Operation True Blue.

The civilian body charged with overseeing the work of the Toronto police, the Services Board won a temporary court injunction last Friday that prohibits the association from mounting its telemarketing campaign. The Services Board has petitioned the court to order the police union to return the \$300,000 it has raised through Operation True Blue and to destroy its lists of those who did and didn't donate, but the court will rule on these requests only after the legality of the by-law is determined.

Whatever the outcome of the various legal cases arising from Operation True Blue, the Toronto Police Association's assertion of police political power and its readiness to defy civilian authorities raise disturbing questions about the state of democratic rights. The media has made much of the fact that the Toronto police union has borrowed its tactics from US police unions and has

been taking advice from the Texas-based Police Labour Institute. Certainly, these links warrant scrutiny. But if the Police Association has become politically emboldened, it is above all because of the law-and-order campaign mounted by the political right in recent years.

This campaign, which portrays the police as society's embattled last line of defence against chaos, has been spearheaded by the Reform Party and in Ontario by the Harris Tory government. By whipping up fear over crime and promising to get tough on criminals, the right seeks to channel growing social anxiety and discontent in a reactionary direction, obscure the social roots of violence, substance abuse and crime, and secure support for expanding the repressive powers of the state.

In recent years, both Ontario Premier Mike Harris and Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman have used endorsements from the Toronto Police Association to tout their law-and-order credentials and paint their political opponents as "soft on crime." They have specifically praised Police Association President Craig Bromwell, who not only has pressed police demands for increased legal powers and weaponry, but whose own rise to power in the police union was directly associated with opposition to civilian oversight of police activities. Bromwell came to prominence in 1995 when he organized officers at a downtown precinct to lock themselves in their police station to protest the laying of charges against cops who had been involved in the brutal arrest of two innocent black men.

If the Toronto establishment has now moved to curb the Police Association's powers and muzzle Bromwell, it is because the Association had begun to threaten prominent members of the right-wing, pro-police majority at City Hall, and because the police's defiance of civilian authorities was disrupting the police's established chain of

command and threatening to discredit the legal system.

First, Jeffrey Lyons, a prominent Tory and member of the Police Service Board, reported that he felt "intimidated" and had ordered his office swept for electronic eavesdropping devices on learning that the police association was investigating his activities. (Although Bromwell now claims he misspoke, in a national television broadcast last fall he boasted that the police union was employing private investigators to dig up dirt on "enemies" of the police.)

Then, a teary-eyed Deputy Toronto Police Chief said he had been told if he didn't resign by the end of March, the police union would leak information that would destroy his career.

Public reaction to these revelations and to Operation True Blue has been strong. With good reason much of the public has viewed the police's telemarketing campaign, in which donors were given windshield decals identifying them as True Blue supporters, as a police shakedown. Given the Association's readiness to defy civilian authorities and angry vows to defeat its enemies, it was hardly a leap to suggest that police might give preferential treatment to those identified as police supporters.

Establishment fears that the police union was becoming independent of its control and the popular reaction against the police's attempt to dictate public policy led to a sudden evaporation of support for Bromwell and his Association. Newspaper columnists like Christie Blatchford who have made a career of serving as conduits for police leaks and promoting police views were suddenly writing about something "rotten" in the Toronto police force.

But there was no better popular weathervane than the longtime police-booster Mayor Mel Lastman. At first Lastman found a pretext to duck the issue of Operation True Blue. He claimed that he would be in a conflict of interest if he commented on the police campaign, because the law firm at which his son works has been retained by the Police Association. But later, Lastman made a very public display of his opposition to the police union's tactics and leadership. Speaking before City Council February 4 he declared, "Because of the events of the last few weeks, I will not seek nor will I accept any endorsement from this police union executive should I decide to seek another term."

Police Services Board chairman Norm Gardner has termed the police union's climb-down "a big victory for the city in general." Others have claimed that all is right since civilian control over the police has been reaffirmed.

Working people will accept these soporific assurances at their peril.

Ontario's Tory provincial government, which under Canada's constitution has ultimate authority over the Toronto police, never spoke out against Operation True Blue. Pressed by reporters to comment, Premier Mike Harris dismissed it as a "local labour" issue.

Solicitor-General David Tsubouchi took a similar line. Then, in the week following the adoption of the Service Board by-law, he brokered a deal between the Police Association and the Toronto authorities that called for the police union to suspend its telemarketing campaign for just 90 days in return for the police chief dropping the charges against the union executive and the Services Board withdrawing its by-law. This deal was accepted by Gardner and Lyons on behalf of the Services Board, but was subsequently rejected by the majority on the Services Board as a cave-in to the Police Association.

Significantly, Tsubouchi called on Ontario Court Judge George Adams to assist him in mediating the conflict between the police union and the Services Board. Adams won praise from police associations across the province for a report that recommended limiting the powers of the Special Investigations Unit, a provincial body that investigates charges of police wrongdoing.

The police's growing political aggressiveness is a product of mounting social tensions in the face of increasing social inequality and social polarization. Unable to offer any progressive solution to the social crisis, big business is increasingly reliant on the cultivation of political reaction and state repression to maintain social order.

While Lastman and his ilk are today castigating the police, or at least the Police Association leadership, for being out of control, tomorrow they will support giving the police greater powers. Indeed, even as the controversy between the Police Association and the Services Board was playing out, a new provincial law came into effect that is designed to drive squeegee kids and all but the most supplicant beggars from Ontario's streets. Lastman has already said that he wants the police to vigorously enforce this reactionary measure.



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