

Toronto police target "anti-cop" politicians

A correspondent
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The Toronto police are defying civilian authorities and pressing forward with a campaign to discredit and unseat "anti-police" politicians.

Last week the Toronto Police Services Board, a body comprised of elected city officials, passed a by-law that makes it illegal for the police to solicit funds "for the purpose of engaging in political activity." But the Toronto Police Association is refusing to comply with the by-law and is continuing "Operation True Blue"—a drive to raise funds to bankroll the Association's campaign against police critics.

The only concession the Association has made to opponents of "Operation True Blue" is to stop giving donors windshield stickers identifying them as police supporters. Several politicians and newspaper columnists said the Association's gift of a decal to contributors to its political action fund smacked of a protection racket. Would police use their discretionary powers, they asked, to issue cautions, rather than traffic tickets, to drivers with windshields sporting "True Blue" stickers?

"Operation True Blue" is only the latest in a series of increasingly aggressive actions taken by the 7,000-member police association to stifle criticism of the police and press for increased police funding and powers. In 1998, Police Association President Craig Bromel announced he was drawing up a list of politicians, mainly city councilors, whom he termed "enemies" of the police.

Last year he revealed that the Association had hired private detectives to investigate politicians who challenged police actions. In particular, the Association has been angered by criticism of police strip-searches and car chases and by the actions of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU), a provincial body that was set up after police were accused of several needless shootings. The Association has also hired private detectives to tail SIU investigations.

Bromel's depiction of the police as subject to probing scrutiny by politicians and the press is absurd. The police enjoy extraordinary support from all levels of government and the entire establishment. Last year, when major cuts were imposed on virtually all city agencies and departments, the police lobbied for and secured a \$22 million boost in the half-billion dollar police budget. Recently, Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman said he would make good on a police department request for helicopters.

The police have been emboldened by the law-and-order campaign of the Tory provincial government. This campaign has a double purpose: to channel mounting social tensions in a reactionary direction and build up the repressive apparatus of the state against the working class. Just this week an Ontario law came into effect that makes it illegal for people to clean car windshields at street corners for tips and outlaws "aggressive panhandling," including begging at bus stops and outside banks.

Ontario Premier Mike Harris and other Tory ministers have all but openly voiced support for the police association campaign. Solicitor-General Dave Tsubouchi, the minister directly responsible for law enforcement, dismissed calls that he intervene in the dispute between the Police Association and the Police Board, saying the matter was a "local labor issue."

Harris compared the teachers' unions' anti-Tory campaign in last year's provincial election to the actions of the Toronto police association, although bourgeois-democratic jurisprudence has traditionally held that the police should be barred from politics because they enjoy special powers and responsibility in enforcing the law. "The issue of how union funds are spent is not an issue that's within in my domain," said Harris.

In the past the Tory premier has gone out of his way to curry favor with the Police Association president, calling Bromel, who still faces a lawsuit for his role in

a police abduction and beating, the man who “leads the Toronto police force.”

Many city politicians, by contrast, have been outraged by the police's actions. Jeffrey Lyons, vice-chairman of the Police Service Board and a Tory fundraiser, has said that when he found out eight months ago that the police association was investigating him he felt so intimidated he had his office swept for electronic listening devices.

This admission led the *Globe and Mail* newspaper to comment in an editorial entitled “End the bullying tactics now,” “If *he's* intimidated, God help the rest of us.”

At a meeting January 27, the Toronto City Council instructed the Police Services Board to take action to end “Operation True Blue.” Then, fearing that the police may have targeted them for surveillance too, the councilors voted that the City should pay to have their offices, homes and cars swept for listening devices.



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