

The John Lennon revelations:

Was there a high-level MI5 agent in the British Workers Revolutionary Party?

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A former agent for the British Security Service (known as MI5) has alleged in a sworn statement that the agency received reports from a high-level spy inside the Workers Revolutionary Party during the late 1960s.

The ex-agent, David Shayler, is currently living in exile in France, where he has fled to escape prosecution for his exposure of state secrets. In his February 18 affidavit, Shayler asserts that the spy provided MI5 with reports of financial support given by John Lennon to the WRP.

Shayler recounts that he was shown portions of an MI5 file relating to the agency's surveillance of Lennon, whose socialist and anti-imperialist sentiments angered the British ruling class.

The affidavit states that the material “concerned Lennon's support for the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), a Trotskyist organization. According to the file, a source in the WRP had reported that Lennon gave tens of thousands of pounds sterling to the WRP in the late 1960s and also provided some funds to the Irish Republican Army at around the same time.”

Shayler's statement was faxed to a federal district court in Los Angeles in support of a Freedom of Information Act motion filed by Professor Jon Wiener, who teaches history at the University of California, seeking the release of Federal Bureau of Investigation surveillance material on Lennon that it had received from MI5.

The FBI has resisted releasing these files on the spurious grounds that they are the property of a foreign government. However, Judge Brian Q. Robbins ruled against the FBI two weeks ago and instructed it to release two letters in which the MI5 summarized the results of the anti-Lennon operation. The documents

promise to shed light on the collaboration of US and British governments in the hounding of the great songwriter and musician. It is expected that the FBI will appeal Judge Robbins' ruling.

Ironically, MI5 had been reluctant to share its surveillance reports on Lennon with the FBI because it feared that this information would eventually reach the public. “MI5 believed,” writes Shayler, “that the FBI might make the information public and compromise its source in the WRP.”

An article that appeared in the *Sunday Times* of London on February 20 provides additional information. According to journalists John Harlow and Nicholas Rufford:

“Officers from MI5's F branch were already carrying out surveillance on the WRP, which was regarded as a serious threat to democracy in Britain. It had a ‘deep throat’ within the organization, possibly the very person to whom Lennon talked. This, to MI5, made him a legitimate target—they wanted to know whether he was conspiratorial or just naïve.

“To this end they opened a general file on him, including newspaper cuttings and snatches of gossip.

“It appears also to have included a handwritten version of the lyrics to Lennon's most overtly political song, ‘Working Class Hero’. He had sent the sheet as a gift to the WRP and it was intercepted by MI5's agent in the party. Today the lyrics would be worth thousands of pounds at auction.”

The *Sunday Times* article also explains the origins of the collaboration of the FBI and MI5.

“In the early 1970s, when Lennon started worrying the FBI, the Washington agency approached its British colleagues for background information. The request,

however, put MI5 into a quandary.

“Lennon's anti-Vietnam activities were unsettling the American authorities and Nixon was anxious to discredit him. MI5 had, in principle, no problem with that but it feared that any information it handed over could endanger its mole within the WRP.

“A compromise was reached in Curzon Street, then MI5's intelligence headquarters in central London, and a summary of Lennon's file was sent to the FBI, omitting any details that could threaten the MI5 mole. They amounted to little more than a few pages that might encourage but not inflame the FBI, according to American sources.

“Certainly it struck a chord in Washington. Undercover agents tracked the Liverpool-born singer and his wife to Irish bars in New York that were holding fundraising events. Their agents even scribbled down the lyrics of the song he was performing. They noted that after the Bloody Sunday shootings in 1972 he proclaimed: ‘If it's a choice between the IRA and the British army, I'm with the IRA.’”

Shayler's affidavit and the *Sunday Times* article by Harlow and Rufford raise serious questions that require further investigation. It has been known for more than a decade—certainly since the appearance of Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* (which the government of Prime Minister Thatcher attempted to suppress)—that the British state attempted to infiltrate agents into the Workers Revolutionary Party. This is the first time, however, that credible information has emerged that indicates that the state had an informer in the upper echelons of the organization.

The WRP, which was until 1985 the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, enjoyed a following among important sections of the working class and also among many well-known figures in the artistic community. During the 1960s, the organization—which was known until November 1973 as the Socialist Labour League—grew rapidly. It is not in the least improbable that John Lennon might have donated money to the British Trotskyists. He would have been one among many British artists who gave support to the revolutionary movement during that period.

However, too little information has been provided to accept Shayler's affidavit unconditionally, let alone the additional revelations of Harlow and Rufford. One

incongruent element of Shayler's affidavit is its reference to the Workers Revolutionary Party rather than the Socialist Labour League. Any document prepared by the British state prior to the autumn of 1973 would have referred to the organization as the SLL. It may be that Shayler has simply used the better-known later name of the organization, with which politically-informed people are more likely to be familiar. This incongruity should be cleared up with the publication of the two letters whose release has been ordered by Judge Robbins.

If the information by Shayler is true, the next demand that socialists and all those committed to democratic rights must raise, in Britain and internationally, is the identification of the MI5 agent inside the SLL/WRP. This is important not only to expose the individual (or individuals) involved but to educate a new generation of socialists in the dangers posed by state infiltration and provocation.

According to Rufford and Harlow “there is no way of knowing about the current status of the WRP mole, although he or she is unlikely still to be active.”

This is not a situation that socialists can accept. First, it should be possible to determine whether there is any substance to the Shayler affidavit. There are former leaders of the SLL/WRP who must know whether John Lennon had any contact with the party in the 1960s and whether he donated money to the movement. If he did, this information would in all likelihood have been privy to a relatively small number of people. Moreover, if the story about the interception of the lyrics of “Working Class Hero” is true, an effort should be made to reconstruct who in the organization might have been in a position to get his or her hand on the handwritten sheet and then pass it on to MI5.

The International Committee of the Fourth International calls upon surviving former leaders of the SLL/WRP—and anyone else in the movement who might have relevant information—to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* or, if they wish, to issue a public statement independently.



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