Police spies active in protests at Democratic convention

John Andrews
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The 20,000 protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles last week included dozens, if not hundreds, of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) infiltrators, according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times* published August 18.

The spies, called "scouts" by the authorities, were poised not only to gather information about the demonstrators and their activities, but also to influence the course of events by providing provocations for police retaliation against demonstrators.

There were two notable police attacks during the convention, each supposedly provoked by a spattering of "anarchists" throwing refuse at squads of heavily armed, riot-clad police. The possibility that these isolated incidents were instigated by police provocateurs cannot be denied.

The first incident occurred following an evening concert by "Rage Against the Machine" in the demonstration area established by federal court order directly in front of Staples Center. Police cited actions by a handful of protesters to declare the concert an "unlawful assembly" and shut it down, although organizers had obtained a permit for the performance. Then, without allowing enough time for the audience to disperse, LAPD officers on horseback charged into the crowd and beat people with batons.

Other officers fired well over 100 rounds of plastic bullets and beanbags out of 37 millimeter and 12 gauge launchers into the crowd, hitting scores of people including those with their arms raised in the air. One round hit Carol Sobel, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) cooperating lawyer instrumental in obtaining the two pre-convention injunctions against the LAPD, right between the eyes, almost causing a catastrophic eye injury.

The second incident occurred late Wednesday afternoon at the conclusion of a march against police brutality. As people filtered into the demonstration area, riot police attacked without warning, with press photographers taking the brunt of the beatings. The ACLU has announced the filing of a lawsuit on their behalf.

The LAPD carried out two mass arrests, one of bicycle riders demanding better lanes and the other of animal rights demonstrators, including many juveniles, protesting against the fur industry. In the first, several police agents were mistakenly arrested along with others. In the second, police agents allegedly supplied information that the protesters were preparing to use homemade "flame-throwers" against stores selling furs.

Lisa Fithian of D2KLA and the Direct Action Network and a spokesperson for the demonstrators suggested that undercover officers facilitated the police attacks and the mass arrests. "There are a lot of unknowns in this now," Fithian said. "The question is, do they create problems in the midst of our meetings or actions?" She continued, "It's standard operating procedure: infiltrate and disrupt. They are potentially trying to incite problems in the midst of our demonstrations. We're not doing anything illegal; we're not doing anything wrong."

The police spies included young people dressed in T-shirts and shorts, bandannas, thong shoes and sneakers. Some wore beards and long hair to mingle with the protesters. Another wore a "Free Mumia" bandanna, a reference to the US political prisoner on Pennsylvania's death row. When asked by a *Times* reporter if they were worried about being swept up in a police action, one responded, smiling, that he was a little worried about being shot "by one of those," pointing to fellow officers in uniform checking out shotguns.

While claiming that the police were not involved in

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any provocations, the authorities boasted that infiltrators provided crucial intelligence gathering, providing police command posts with “real time” information. Given the political forces involved in and around the Democratic Party convention, it is legitimate to ask whether some of the police agents may have been employed by those who hoped violent confrontations might discredit the Democrats and boost Republican chances in the presidential election this fall.

Like their counterparts in other major US cities, the authorities in Los Angeles have a long history of using police spies against their political opponents. In the 1930s police “red squads” broke up union and left-wing meetings. After World War II, the notorious Public Disorder Intelligence Division (PDID) was formed by the LAPD, which flooded various radical groups with agents, even sending undercover cops as delegates to out-of-state national conventions. In one well-publicized incident, a deputy police chief used PDID files to derail the campaign of police critic Michael Zinzun for election to the Pasadena City Council, resulting in a multimillion dollar jury verdict against the LAPD.

Amid such revelations, in 1982 the LAPD settled an American Civil Liberties Union suit by formally disbanding PDID, and allegedly adopting more stringent guidelines for its replacement, the Anti-Terrorist Division. Four years ago, however, the Police Commission quietly eliminated rules governing undercover operations, allowing greatly expanded spying operations. As a result, the *Times* noted, the “department now uses these officers routinely.”

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