

Police targeted protesters at Republican National Convention for their political views

Tom Bishop
12 September 2000

The release of previously sealed search warrants obtained by the Philadelphia police during the Republican National Convention at the beginning of August, disclose that authorities specifically targeted activists because of their political beliefs. The newly unsealed affidavits show police identified key protest groups and organizers, stating funds for one group “allegedly originate with Communist and leftist parties and from sympathetic trade unions” or from “the former Soviet-allied World Federation of Trade Unions.”

The warrants were used to justify the August 1 raid on the protesters' headquarters in West Philadelphia by 150 police who seized and destroyed property and arrested all 75 occupants inside. The affidavits were also the grounds for sweeping police intelligence-gathering before the convention, including the monitoring of electronic messages sent by demonstrators on Internet mailing lists and web sites, and the infiltration of protest groups by police spies. Many of those arrested were kept in jail for more than two weeks after the convention and more than 300 cases are pending against the demonstrators.

The warrant specifically alleged that money from “communist sources” was given to the Pennsylvania Consumer Action Network by People's Global Action, a protest group formed in Switzerland two years ago. PCAN released its donor list last week, which shows they raised \$48,000, mostly from trade unions. The only political group listed was the Communist Party of Eastern Pennsylvania, which donated \$200.

Among those cited in the affidavit are John Sellers, of the Ruckus Society, and Kate Sorenson, of ACT UP/Philadelphia, who were initially held on \$1 million bail when they were arrested after the mass demonstration in Center City Philadelphia on August 1,

during which over 400 protestors were arrested.

At a press conference on September 7 civil liberties attorneys and advocates denounced the violation of the protesters' constitutionally guaranteed political freedoms. Stefan Presser, the legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, called the warrant an “outrage,” saying, “That document could have been written by Hoover's FBI in the 40s and 50s.” He said that the warrant served as a pretext for one of the largest instances of preventative detention in modern American history.

Presser also accused the Philadelphia police—who are prohibited by a federal court order from infiltrating protest organizations—of carrying out an “end run” around basic liberties by using state troopers to spy on demonstrators. Other civil rights attorneys at the press conference condemned police infiltration as a violation of free speech and raised the possibility that police officers acted as provocateurs during the demonstrations. The attorneys said that the contents of the search warrant would become part of the cases of the more than 450 demonstrators arrested during the convention.

Throughout the convention police claimed that they were responding to threats of violence. It is now clear that protesters were targeted solely because of their political affiliation. Much of the “evidence” used against protesters was supplied to the police by ultra right and anticommunist forces. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported Sunday that the allegations against the protest groups originated from the Maldon Institute, a right-wing think tank funded by the Pittsburgh-area millionaire and publishing magnate Richard Mellon Scaife, one of the leading forces in the impeachment drive against President Clinton. Pennsylvania state police spokesman Jack Lewis said the Maldon Institute

is a private organization which routinely provides intelligence information to police departments by email. The affidavits specifically cite an April 7 Maldon Institute research report as the source of the allegations.

According to financial forms for Scaife's Carthage Foundation, Scaife provided the Maldon Institute with \$250,000 in 1998. Board members of the Maldon Institute include D. James Kennedy, a Florida televangelist who co-founded the Moral Majority with Jerry Falwell, and Robert Moss, a journalist and novelist who in the 1980s wrote that the KGB used Western media to manipulate public opinion. A key figure in the 15-year-old institute is John H. Rees, a British-born contributor to the John Birch Society and publisher of a newsletter devoted to intelligence gathering, which is distributed to police. In the 1970s, Rees published the Information Digest, which gave details gathered after he infiltrated left-wing groups under a false name. This year Rees helped organize an invitation-only conference in New York City on terrorism that drew FBI agents and police.

Throughout the Republican convention officials from the Philadelphia Police Department repeatedly denied that they had sent spies into the protest groups. In 1987 the ACLU and other groups filed a federal lawsuit challenging the infiltration by Philadelphia police of groups planning demonstrations during the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the US Constitution. The directive required permission from the mayor, managing director and police commissioner for undercover operations against political organizations.

There is little doubt that the police operation had the support, not only of local and state authorities, but the FBI and Justice Department as well. Police spies were also employed by the Los Angeles Police Department during last month's Democratic National Convention, as part of a highly coordinated effort between local, state and federal authorities. Protesters and civil rights advocates in Los Angeles said it was likely that police provocateurs amongst the protesters were involved in acts of violence and vandalism that gave police a pretext to carry out mass arrests and assaults on the demonstrators.

While police officials and Mayor John Street's office declined comment on the contents of the search

warrants, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge enthusiastically endorsed the actions of the police. Ridge spokesman Tim Reeves called the state police action "a basic step to ensure public safety in the face of a clear threat." He said the undercover operation was part of the state's "primary role at the convention, which was providing protection for governors in attendance." Philadelphia police also violated the court order by illegally photographing participants at organizing meetings for the demonstrations.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact