

Britain: Documentary reveals how trade union leaders worked with secret services

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A recent BBC documentary, *True Spies*, has revealed that up to 23 senior trade unionists regularly provided intelligence to the secret services in the 1970s. One of the union leaders exposed as a state informer was Joe Gormley, former president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

The makers of *True Spies* interviewed a number of police officers who worked in the Special Branch “Industrial Section”, responsible for cultivating secret contacts with top trade unionists.

Ken Day (Metropolitan Police Special Branch 1969-98), said on camera, “The extreme left were getting the upper hand and were dictating the policy of the unions. Then we found ourselves going to unions and talking to top union officials about what was going on.... One of them was Joe Gormley at the National Union of Mineworkers. He was certainly in a position of power and was in a position to furnish us with what we were looking for.”

Alan (Metropolitan Police Special Branch 1965-83), described the relationship with these trade union leaders as, “A very close working relationship. You could pick up the telephone and talk to them, we would meet them.”

Archive footage of a conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was played, showing the bureaucrats on the platform linking arms to sing “Auld Lang Syne” at the end of proceedings. The interviewer could be heard saying, “Joe Gormley was by no means the only trade union leader to have such secret friends.”

“I think we had about 22 or 23 different characters we were discussing with,” Special Branch officer Day divulges. Asked why the leader of a union would be talking to Special Branch officers behind the backs of his members, Day answered, “He loved his country. He was a patriot. He was very wary and worried about the growth of militancy within his own union.”

The year 1972 saw a large number of industrial disputes, with the miners taking national strike action for the first time since the General Strike of 1926. In all, 24 million working days were lost to strike action that year, with the miners accounting for 45 percent of them.

The miners organised “flying pickets”, which were particularly successful in stopping coal supplies getting through to the power stations. Amid frequent blackouts, the

Conservative government of Edward Heath declared a state of emergency, introducing the “three-day week” in industry to conserve electricity.

In February 1974, the miners again went on strike. The price of petrol increased five-fold and within days, Heath called a general election, declaring that the issue was “who runs the country”—the government or the unions? After narrowly losing the vote, Heath stayed on in Downing Street for four days before resigning, as tanks were seen at Heathrow airport and rumours of a possible coup circulated in the press.

Gormley was NUM president during both the 1972 and 1974 miners’ strikes, and was in the ideal position to provide his Special Branch “handlers” with useful information about the actions of the militant miners.

By the late 1970s, the car industry was gripped by a series of strikes and walkouts, in particular at the nationalised British Leyland company’s Longbridge plant. *True Spies* interviewed Keith, a West Midlands Police Special Branch officer, who revealed the existence of a senior representative within the engineers union who provided them with intelligence. “He knew all the top union leaders from whichever union they were in.”

Interviewer: “And what kind of information was he able to provide on ... for example, Longbridge?”

Keith: “Their intentions, what they were going to do, the kind of ... strikes that were going to be called ... and he was very, very highly valued. It was instantly reported on to MI5, I know because ... they came to see him quite a lot, and they held him in the highest regard.”

The state continued to maintain links with senior union representatives inside the NUM into the 1980s. This proved vital when the miners launched their year-long strike in 1984.

According to *True Spies*, the state was running a highly placed agent, close to NUM president Arthur Scargill and the union leadership.

Interviewer: “We understand the agent’s codename was ‘Silver Fox’.”

Tony Clement (Assistant Chief Constable, South Yorkshire Police, 1981-85): “There was a fairly senior man within the NUM who was talking to Special Branch. He was at the level where he would sit round the table with the NUM leadership.”

John Nesbit (South Yorkshire Police, 1962-92): “We were in a position to get information, very, very specific and precise information that was correct every time, as to where the violent picketing would be taking place, particularly when the miners started to go back to work. Every time we got the information—that I understand came from a Special Branch informant—it was absolutely spot on and allowed me to deploy men and to successfully carry out a police operation.”

Although the programme series was titled *True Spies*, those sitting round the top table of the TUC who regularly passed on information about their members to Special Branch and MI5 could more accurately be labelled collaborators. They were not professional intelligence agents or police officers who had secretly infiltrated the workers’ movement (although such specimens and infiltrators of far-left groups were discussed in the three programmes). Rather they were motivated by nationalist and anti-communist sentiments to pass on information to their handlers. The programme did not reveal a single instance where such a relationship was the result of the usual approach made by the secret services when recruiting agents inside an unsympathetic organisation; money or blackmail. Like Joe Gormley, many of them were “patriots”, who saw their natural allies as the capitalist state rather than the working class, which they were nominally supposed to represent.

More often, they were prepared to play the stool pigeon not for thirty pieces of silver, but for much more mundane rewards. West Midlands Police Special Branch officer “Keith” disclosed that his highly placed agent at Longbridge “was an easy man to look after. He would enjoy a couple of pints in an ordinary pub somewhere where he may not be recognised, and then always wanted to eat fish and chips in your car before he got home, and that’s the way you ran him.”

Several trade union representatives and labour movement activists interviewed by the programme expressed their shock or surprise at the extent and level of state penetration. But only the naïve or foolish could assume the state would not try to gain intelligence from inside the unions, particularly during a time of mass industrial action. Indeed, given that a significant proportion of the TUC General Council must have regularly been having “friendly chats” with Special Branch and MI5 during the industrial unrest of the 1970s, one must ask who are the agents sitting in Congress House today?

The informants sitting around the union executives enjoyed the privileges their position inside the bureaucracy gave them, and, like Joe Gormley, went on to well-rewarded retirement. However, rank-and-file workers who were labelled “subversive” by the state fared much worse.

True Spies revealed that in the 1970s the Ford Motor Company only agreed to invest in Merseyside on the basis of a secret agreement to keep “subversives” out of its Halewood plant. As a result many ordinary rank-and-file union members, and particularly those belonging to leftwing organisations,

often faced being blacklisted, resulting in years of unemployment.

Tony Robinson (Lancashire Police Special Branch 1965-81): “My senior officer said one of your responsibilities is to make certain that the Ford factory is kept clean of subversives. Part of the plan drawn up was to ensure Fords could keep working without the expected Merseyside disease ... strikes and layoffs. And that the workforce would be vetted. The arrangement was drawn up that Special Branch would do this.”

Every week, Ford would submit the names of the latest job applicants to the local Special Branch. “We were expected to check these lists against our known subversives and if any were seen on the list, strike a line through it,” Robinson said.

Interviewer: “That’s called blacklisting, isn’t it?”

Robinson: “Well, there is no other term for it. But it was done, to my way of thinking, for the right reasons.”

Interviewer: “What right does MI5 of Special Branch have to vet me for my job?”

Robinson: “Unfortunately, in the real world this has to be so.”

In the “doublethink” of the Special Branch Industrial Section, this is called defending democracy.

Robinson: “You have to draw a line somewhere when it comes to protecting the state. And if at the end of the day civil liberties are infringed, then so be it.”

Robinson also revealed that when he first joined Special Branch he went on a preliminary course at MI5 headquarters and was shown the registry, where all the operational files are kept. “There were just thousands and thousands of files in the rack. There must have been upward, if not more, than a million.”

True Spies, BBC web site
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/true_spies/default.stm



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wsws.org/contact