

Police spy uncovered in California peace group

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The California antiwar group Peace Fresno was infiltrated by an undercover agent working for the Fresno Sheriff's Department, according to an article published earlier this month on the website sf.indymedia.org. The pacifist organization, based in Fresno, a city of nearly half a million located about 120 miles southwest of the San Francisco, has opposed the war in Iraq and the Bush administration's attack on civil liberties in the US.

Aaron Kilner, known as Aaron Stokes to the Peace Fresno activists, attended several meetings of the group where he "took voluminous notes," passed out antiwar fliers and went to rallies in April and May of this year. He was described as "quiet" by Ken Hudson, a long-time Peace Fresno activist. Others remembered that he did not actively engage in political, tactical or other discussions while attending meetings. He did attend the anti-globalization demonstration at the WTO conference on Agricultural Science and Technology in Sacramento in June 2003.

Kilner's true identity was revealed after he was killed in a motorcycle accident on August 30th. In his obituary in the *Fresno Bee* newspaper he was identified as a member of the Fresno County Sheriff's department, "assigned to the anti-terrorist team." According to local activists, this refers to the local Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), one of several teams founded shortly after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks consisting, according to the FBI War on Terrorism web page, of "state and local law enforcement officers, FBI agents and other federal agents and personnel who work together to investigate and prevent acts of terrorism." Peace Fresno members recognized Kilner's picture in the obituary and realized that he was the same man who had posed as a supporter of their group.

Some Peace Fresno members first speculated that Kilner may have had an interest in the peace movement and attended their meetings on his own behalf. "The first question on everyone's mind was 'a dove in hawk's clothing or a hawk in dove's clothing?'" said Peace Fresno member Nicholas DeGraff. But according to his brother, Matt, Kilner was not attending the Peace Fresno meetings on his own time. "He was doing his job, going to different organizations. He wasn't out to get anyone. He was . . . open to people's beliefs, but he was *making sure no*

one crossed over the boundary."

Fresno County Sheriff Richard Pierce, while admitting that a deputy sheriff was working undercover at Peace Fresno, denied that the group was under investigation. The *Fresno Bee* printed a statement from Pierce stating that "Detective Aaron Kilner was a member of the FCSD [Fresno County Sheriff's Department] Anti-Terrorism unit. This unit collects, evaluates, collates, analyzes, and disseminates information on individuals, groups, and organizations suspected of criminal or terrorist activities." However, he continued "Peace Fresno was not and is not the subject of any investigation by the FCSD."

If Peace Fresno was not the target then the question remains who or what was the subject of the sheriff's department investigation? According to a sheriff's detective, the department could not say what exactly was being investigated because of the "sensitive nature" of Kilner's work.

A directive from State Attorney General Bill Lockyer issued to California law enforcement in July stated that the collection of intelligence on religious or political groups should only be undertaken where there is evidence of criminal activity. "The idea of anyone in Peace Fresno doing anything illegal is laughable," says their attorney, Catherine Campbell. "They're Unitarian schoolteachers." However, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 permits agents to look into acts of "civil disobedience and minor lawbreaking."

In a statement released on October 5, Peace Fresno demanded to know why they were targeted, who assigned the deputy to spy on them and what other organizations or groups are under surveillance in Fresno. "The sheriff knows an investigation requires evidence of a crime, and he knows Peace Fresno has never engaged in criminal activity," the statement said.

Why, then, was this group of "Unitarian schoolteachers," a group publicly dedicated to non-violence, infiltrated?

This is not the first time that an "anti-terrorist" unit has been used to spy on citizen groups expressing dissenting views. On April 2 of this year, before their assault on peaceful protesters at the Port of Oakland, Oakland police were warned of "potential violence" at the protest by the California Anti-Terrorist Information Center (CATIC). CATIC is another group formed, like the JTTFs, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks "to provide law enforcement with statewide support to

combat terrorism,” according to the California Attorney General’s Office website. Established by a Memorandum of Understanding signed September 25, 2001 by California Attorney General Bill Lockyer and Governor Gray Davis, the center, which receives \$6.7 million a year in state funds to prevent terrorism, has “gathered and analyzed information on activists of various stripes almost since its creation” according to an unnamed Bay Area “counterterrorism” official. Members of CATIC are assigned to six of the FBI’s JTTFs in California.

The CATIC bulletin warned Oakland Police that the protesters intended to “shut down” the port and possibly act violently, without offering any evidence that this was in fact the case. At the time, a spokesman for CATIC, one Mike Van Winkle, declared that such evidence “wasn’t needed to issue warnings on war protesters.” In an attempt to equate legitimate antiwar protests with treason, he went on to state that in protests against a war that is fighting terrorism, “You can almost argue that a protest against that is a terrorist act.” As a direct result of the CATIC bulletin, which through innuendo and supposition—suggesting, for example, that the protesters would be armed with metal bolts, rocks, or even Molotov cocktails—implied that violence was expected, police descended on the demonstration at the Port and were given the go-ahead to fire with “less-than-lethal” weapons on protesters.

Following the Port of Oakland incident, in May 2003, representatives of both the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Northern California and the ACLU of Southern California sent a letter of protest to the state attorney general, noting that the anti-terrorist information center “is not only being used to gather information about nonviolent protestors but equates peaceful protest with terrorism itself.” The letter said this danger to basic freedoms had been “heightened in light of the rewriting of federal intelligence guidelines by Attorney General John Ashcroft,” allowing federal agents to monitor political and religious activity *in the absence of any suspicion*, and ending with a reminder of the “gross abuses that occurred as a result of unfettered intelligence gathering” in the 1960s and 1970s.

Widespread domestic spying was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the FBI’s notorious COINTELPRO (counter-intelligence program) operation. Under then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, COINTELPRO targeted black nationalists, civil rights activists and opponents of the Vietnam War. Those under surveillance included boxer Muhammad Ali, actress Jane Fonda, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Dr. Martin Luther King and the Black Panther Party, among many others.

The origins of the covert intelligence program date back to the spying and disruption operations against the Communist Party in the 1920s and 1930s. COINTELPRO was launched in 1956, in part because of frustration with Supreme Court rulings limiting the government’s power to proceed overtly against dissident groups. For the next 15 years the FBI conducted covert spying and provocations aimed at preventing the

exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that preventing the growth of “dangerous” groups and the propagation of “dangerous” ideas would protect the national security and supposedly deter violence.

The program officially ended in 1971 under threat of public exposure after the FBI resident agency in Media, Pennsylvania, was broken into and documents about its secret operations were widely publicized. Nevertheless, in many cases local police departments did not disband their red squads and continued spying on left-wing organizations.

While the trampling of democratic rights was carried out on in the name of “fighting communism” during an earlier period, today it is being conducted under the label of the “war on terrorism.”

The fact that these methods have been revived since the September 11 attacks is a clear expression first, of the Bush administration’s anticipation of resistance to its attack on civil liberties and second, of the administration’s attempt to counter the resistance now spreading amongst working people who are no longer supporting the Iraq war and who are becoming more vocal in their demands that their tax dollars go to support education, health care, jobs and other needs at home.

The revelations of the criminal behavior of this administration, beginning with the illegal installation of Bush in the White House, and all of the lies that have followed, have awakened working people to the true nature of the gang in Washington. As increasing numbers of people and organizations begin to make their voices heard above the white noise of the media, the government is taking steps to silence them by equating political opponents with enemies of the people.

Millions of dollars in California and other states have been used to fund anti-democratic activities under the auspices of Homeland Security while resources for social programs have been slashed without mercy. The exposure of the police spying on the Peace Fresno group raises the need to find out what other groups have been targeted solely for political reasons. At the very least, innuendo and supposition were accorded the same weight as factual evidence of “potential violence” and the result was the police firing rubber bullets and tear gas at peaceful demonstrators at the Port of Oakland. An investigation into the operations of these modern-day red squads is not merely warranted, but imperative.



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