

Private security company in Iraq suppressed labor struggles in US

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There is an additional dimension to the private security firms operating in Iraq, which has not been commented on in the mainstream media. In some cases, these companies, which recruit ex-US Special Forces operatives and right-wing militia types, have a long history of violent repression against the working class in America.

One example is DS Vance Iraq, which according to a company profile that appears on the web site iraqitradecenter.com, “operates several security teams from bases throughout Iraq” and is “registered with the Coalition Provisional Authority as a Security Provider for Iraq.” The company, which supplies fully armed security and intelligence personnel and recruits and trains local guards, provides “General Security, Convoy Protection, Close Protection and Asset Protection” for such companies as Siemens and General Electric.

The company was formed last December by Decision Strategies (DS) and Vance International, two Virginia-based security firms recently acquired by SPX Corporation, an industrial services company traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

Anyone familiar with the history of the class struggle in America over the last quarter century will recognize Vance International. The company is synonymous with the violence employed by corporate America during its union-busting crusade of the 1980s and 1990s. The company, which regularly advertised for recruits in the pages of *Soldier of Fortune* and *Gung-Ho* magazines, hired ex-military and fascistic types to break strikes by Detroit and Seattle newspaper workers, Pittston coal miners, Greyhound bus drivers, Caterpillar and Bridgestone workers and scores of others.

The company, founded by former Secret Service agent Chuck Vance, surpassed all other union-busting firms for its paramilitary methods and anti-working

class violence. Arriving at the scene of a strike in black uniforms and combat boots and equipped with tear gas, shields and attack dogs, Vance’s Asset Protection Team would ring the location with barb wire, floodlights and video cameras and place armed guards on factory roof-tops. Throughout working class communities Vance guards were denounced as thugs and “jack-booted Nazis,” and even alienated local police departments with their brutality.

Vance guards regularly beat up strikers, followed them to their homes and provided lists of “trouble-makers” to local police. Their specialty was provoking confrontations on picket lines, and then video taping them in order to obtain court injunctions to limit picketing and pave the way to the arrest and blacklisting of workers for “union violence.” If their methods of psychological warfare failed to produce any “evidence” Vance guards simply manufactured it, leading to long prison sentences for militant workers.

During the Detroit newspaper strike of 1995-96, 20 Vance guards beat striker Vito Sciuto with a stick, breaking his skull. In comments to a reporter afterwards, a Vance employee said the guards wanted “to hurt people.” And hurt people they did: 61 strikers were attacked or injured by scabs, Vance security guards or police, including 15 who were run over by cars and 20 who were assaulted, during the 19-month strike. The company’s strikebreaking activity earned it a gross income of \$90 million in 1995 alone.

Over the last decade Vance International has evolved from a company focused on providing mercenaries to terrorize striking workers in the US and Canada to one cashing in on Bush’s “war on terror” and the multimillion-dollar contracts that flow from it. Its operations have spread from North America to Latin America, South Africa and Europe.

Vance's Asset Protection Team is now led by George M. "Skip" Flanagan, a 24-year veteran of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command with 12 years in Special Forces and 11 years with the Counter Terrorism Unit 1st SFOD-DELTA, "Delta Force."

The company is well-connected to the Bush administration and according to iraqtradecenter.com it has "support and sponsorship from key decision makers connected to and working in the Governing Council of Iraq." Interestingly, the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign committee has a \$1.5 million contract with Vance Uniformed Protection to provide "equipment/personnel services" at campaign headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

Vance International is only one of several private security firms under contract by the US government that have a long history of brutal treatment against working people and political dissidents. Wackenhut Corrections Corp., which is reportedly getting contracts for services at the US prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, provides security for US embassies throughout the world and has \$200 million in government contracts. It also operates several privately run prisons and detention centers in the US, including one in Jamaica, New York, operated under a contract from the Department of Homeland Security, where asylum-seekers carried out a hunger strike last October to protest inhumane conditions in the windowless former warehouse.

Founded in 1954 by former FBI official George Wackenhut, the company has long enjoyed close ties to the US military and intelligence establishment. According to a 1997 article by Ken Silverstein, "America's Private Gulag," about the privatized prison business, over the years Wackenhut's board and staff have included such veterans of the US national security state as former CIA deputy directors Frank Carlucci and Bobby Ray Inman, former CIA director William Casey, as well as Jorge Mas Canosa, leader of the fanatically anticommunist Cuban American National Foundation. "The company provided strikebreakers at the Pittston mine strike in Kentucky, hired unlicensed investigators to ferret out whistleblowers at Alyeska, the company that controls the Alaskan oil pipeline, and had beaten anti-nuclear demonstrators at facilities it guards for the Department of Energy," wrote Silverstein.

In Iraq private security companies are immune from US military rules as well as local laws, giving them a virtual license to kill. Moreover, interrogators from private security firms, like those who were at the Abu Ghraib prison, can direct the savage torture of prisoners with impunity.

The operation of these high-paid mercenaries in America's colonial wars poses enormous dangers to working people in the US. The training these fascistic elements receive in urban warfare, crowd control, running concentration camps and the assassination of political opponents in Iraq and other colonial adventures can be used in the future for the repression of political dissent and working class struggles in America.



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