

Civil rights advocates denounce FBI harassment of protesters

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In response to reports that the FBI has visited dozens of people in advance of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (see “Specter of a police state: FBI ‘anti-terror’ task force targets Bush administration opponents”), civil rights attorneys and others have denounced the FBI tactics as heavy-handed, with an obvious “chilling” effect on protest or other forms of free speech.

The American Civil Liberties Union issued a statement on August 16, reading in part: “The American Civil Liberties Union today denounced the FBI’s use of the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) to monitor, interrogate and suppress antiwar and other political protesters and called on individuals who have been targeted for investigation to come forward.”

ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero stated: “The FBI’s intimidation and interrogation of peaceful protesters brings back eerie echoes of the days of J. Edgar Hoover.” Romero continued, “It is troubling that the FBI continues to advocate spying on peaceful protesters. But even protesters who engage in civil disobedience or other disruptive acts should not be treated like potential terrorists.”

Jeffrey Fogel, legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City, represents at least one of those visited. He told the WSW: “The real concern about the FBI visits is that they equate what goes on at protests with terrorism. Any information they develop goes straight to the terrorism task force. The attempt to equate what goes on at protests with terrorism is not valid. We don’t have as many examples today as in the McCarthy era, but the examples we have are extremely disturbing. The government is headed more and more down the road of an authoritarian state.”

National Public Radio interviewed Sarah Bardwell and two ACLU attorneys. Sarah is an intern with the American Friends Service Committee, a nonviolent

Quaker group, who was visited at her home in Denver, Colorado. She told NPR, “We were visited by four FBI agents and two local police. One of them was armed to the teeth. They told us they were doing a ‘pre-emptive’ investigation of possible anarchists or terrorists. They asked if we had any information about any violent or criminal acts being planned at the Republican or Democratic National Conventions. They said that if we didn’t reveal any knowledge we may have of such acts to them, that we would also be guilty of a crime.” Sarah and her housemates refused to answer.

Their attorney, Mark Silverstein of the Colorado ACLU, pointed out, “The interns were quite right not to answer these questions. These are not the kinds of questions that are designed to elicit information. They are the kinds of questions designed to intimidate.”

Silverstein also discussed how, for several years, Denver police participated in the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, turning over names and license numbers of those who participated in peaceful protests. Eight separate categories of “extremists” were also maintained by the Denver police and added to the FBI’s “Violent Gang and Terrorist Organization File.”

While most of the 7,000 people on the list had no criminal records, they were subject to special scrutiny if they were stopped for any traffic violation. (See the ACLU’s report on “The Denver Spy Files” at <http://www.aclu-co.org/spyfiles/fbifiles.htm>.)

NPR also interviewed Denise Lieberman, legal director of the Eastern Missouri ACLU in St. Louis, where at least three individuals were subjected to the FBI visits. Lieberman told NPR: “I doubt if the FBI were aware that any criminal activity was going to take place at the DNC, the RNC, at any presidential debates, any elections, or any other activities.” Her clients were subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury on the same day they were planning to go to the Democratic National Convention, making it

impossible for them to participate in any protests there.

Heidi Boghosian, executive director of the National Lawyers Guild, also spoke to the WSWS. “We have received literally dozens of calls from people who have been visited by the FBI,” she said. “We tell them not to talk to the FBI without a lawyer, and we do our best to line them up with attorneys depending on what part of the country they are located in.

“This is part of a larger pattern of intimidating demonstrators that we have seen in a whole series of protests from Miami to Washington, DC. Police portray the demonstrators as violent, but the Guild has been seeing that most of the violence comes from the police.

“We expect to see mass false arrests at the Republican National Convention. We have found elsewhere that an order to disperse either was never given, or it was not given audibly, after which large groups of protesters were arrested. In DC, police arrested a group in a parking garage who were wearing black, even though they were found to possess tickets and keys for their cars. There was nothing wrong with what these people were doing, but the police associate black with anarchists, so they arrested them.

“I also think the RNC is going to be the culmination of all kinds of police tactics that have been used at other recent demonstrations.

“What is happening now is not simply harassment of protestors at demonstrations, but a kind of a ‘pre-demonstration’ attempt to keep people from even showing up. The FBI visits are designed to do two things—to frighten individuals and their friends not to attend protests, and to send the message through the national media that people should keep away. The message is that protesters must be bad if the FBI is visiting them, and people shouldn’t have anything to do with them.”

The WSWS urges those who have been targeted by the FBI operation to contact the WSWS so that we can provide our readership with detailed information on this latest assault on basic rights.



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