

Police provocateur infiltrates political and protest groups in Australia

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In a series of articles published last month, Melbourne's *Age* newspaper revealed that a covert police agent recently infiltrated several left-wing political and activist groups, including Socialist Alternative, Stop the War Coalition, Unity for Peace, and Animal Liberation Victoria. Beginning in 2006, the agent provocateur was involved in anti-Iraq war demonstrations—including last year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) protests in Sydney—animal liberation actions, and participated in planning meetings for a protest to be held against a weapons fair in South Australia.

The two-year operation represents an extraordinary abrogation by the state of the right of citizens to participate in public activities and join political organisations without fear of police harassment. It underscores the extent to which basic democratic rights and established legal norms have been torn up under the banner of the so-called war on terror. Political dissent—any form of disagreement with the existing social and political order—is now being effectively criminalised.

The police agent who infiltrated the various political organisations was working with the Victorian Security Intelligence Group (SIG)—the police counter-terrorism unit. The SIG is also responsible for protection of dignitaries, strategic threat assessments, and monitoring so-called "issue-motivated groups". Formerly operating as the Operations Intelligence Unit, then re-badged as the SIG, the unit has been expanding its operations in line with increasingly draconian federal and state anti-terror legislation.

The activities of another SIG provocateur were critical in securing the recent convictions of seven men on terror charges in Victoria's Supreme Court. The prosecution's case revolved around the evidence of "Security Intelligence Operative 39" who befriended Muslim cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika. The covert agent then offered Benbrika cheap ammonium nitrate, and took him to a remote hilltop to demonstrate how to detonate a small container containing the explosive.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted: "[T]he only explosion presented as evidence in the trial was one conducted by a police provocateur for the clear purpose of entrapping the cleric." (See "Contradictory verdicts in Australia's largest terrorism trial")

While details of the SIG agent's activities in Socialist Alternative and the other protest organisations remain scant, there is no reason to believe that the modus operandi was any different to that of Security Intelligence Operative 39—infiltrate and gain influence in pursuit of a prosecution and conviction based on provocation and entrapment.

According to the *Age*, Socialist Alternative was "the first group [the cop] targeted in 2006". In September 2007 he travelled with Socialist Alternative to Sydney for antiwar protests timed to coincide with US

President George Bush's visit for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.

The agent also reportedly posed as a vegan and participated in Animal Liberation meetings from February 2007. In June 2008 he took part in an illegal raid on a battery hen farm outside Melbourne.

Earlier this year he was a member of the organising committee for an annual antiwar event known as the Palm Sunday rally, organised by church and pacifist groups. The police agent took the minutes during meetings held in the lead-up to the rally.

From February this year he also participated in planning for demonstrations in Adelaide against a proposed arms fair, the Asia Pacific Defence and Security exhibition, that was to be held on November 11. According to media reports, information gathered by the agent on the planned protests was passed on to the South Australian Labor government and led to the cancellation of the arms fair.

The *Age* reported that earlier this year: "In the face of increasing suspicions from several community groups about who he really worked for, it was time for the Victoria Police Security Intelligence Group undercover officer to disappear. So he invented one last lie; a sick relative in Cambodia whom he needed to visit. And then he was gone; his phone in his flat in Melbourne's south disconnected, his mobile numbers no longer working, his chair at numerous Victorian activist groups unfilled."

The state Labor government responded to the *Age* revelations by rejecting out of hand any investigation or reform to covert police activities. Police Minister Bob Cameron simply insisted that there was "appropriate oversight" over the Security Intelligence Group. Cameron also rejected criticisms of the government's 2006 amendments to the Freedom of Information Act, which protect intelligence documents at police request. Documents, including intelligence reports on people who may not have committed any crime, can now be stored for an indefinite period.

Liberal response

The media has quickly dropped its coverage of the issue. In an editorial on October 20, the *Age* made clear that its central concern was not the threat to civil liberties but rather that the SIG might not only discredit itself but the broader "war on terror" as well.

"There is no doubt that the SIG has conducted legitimate infiltration and surveillance operations," it declared. "The recent conviction of

several members of an Islamic jihadist terrorist cell, which resulted from an SIG operation, is a notable instance... In this time of heightened anxieties, there has always been a danger that civil liberties would be undermined by those notionally trying to protect them. When a police security intelligence unit starts infiltrating the organising committees of peace marches rather than suspected terrorist cells, that danger has become very real indeed."

The *Age's* description of the SIG's setup of the Benbrika group as a "legitimate" operation dovetails with its claim that the police unit's work is aimed at "trying to protect" civil liberties. This mouthpiece of the Victorian liberal establishment is demonstrating its support for the sweeping assault underway on democratic rights and the authoritarian logic underlying the anti-terror legislation.

The so-called war on terror has been promoted by ruling elites in Australia and around the world as a means to legitimise their predatory, neo-colonial operations abroad and their attacks on democratic rights at home. It has nothing whatsoever to do with protecting ordinary people from the threat of harm from terrorist attack.

The question can be raised: if it is regarded as legitimate "anti-terror" police work for the agents provocateurs who infiltrated a group of disoriented men, influenced by religious fundamentalist ideas, to actively encourage their disorientation, incite discussions about violence, and provide them with the illegal material that triggered their arrest and prosecution, then on what grounds can one oppose the same methods being applied to other citizens, including members of political parties and protest organisations?

Once the framework of the "war on terror" is accepted then the issue is no longer the democratic rights of the people but the rights of police to wage this "war" and the efficacy of police tactics.

A clear demonstration of this was provided by Julian Burnside, president of the civil liberties group Liberty Victoria, who responded to the *Age* reports by suggesting that police infiltration activities might require "greater oversight" by an external body. "I wonder how many people would feel comfortable that they were referred to in a police document, however innocuous," he said. "I don't think the police have asked: to what extent are we invading people's privacy? And what are we gaining from doing so?"

But since when has it been up to the police to weigh up the costs and benefits of potential provocations? The real issue is not the judgement of the police agents involved, but whether or not citizens have recognised rights that the state may not legally violate.

The SIG's infiltration of political organisations is no accident or aberration. In 2003, after the government bolstered the SIG's powers through the Terrorism (Community Protection) Act, the *World Socialist Web Site* presciently warned: "The new laws strengthen the hand of the SIG and the entire police force to spy on political opponents of the government, operate as agents provocateurs and carry out entrapment exercises." (See "Australia: State Labor government hands police unprecedented powers")

Outstanding questions

There are many outstanding questions about the SIG agent's two-year activities within the different political groups. The *Age* provided only a broad outline and chose not to name him. And none of the

affected organisations has issued a public statement providing a full account of their knowledge of the agent and his activity in their groups.

Leading Socialist Alternative member Mick Armstrong was quoted in the *Age* saying: "On the one hand you've got police saying 'we will be open and co-operate with you' if you tell them what you are doing ahead of a rally or some sort of action, but then you learn they are still spying on you. It's completely unjustified."

The WSWs made several phone calls to Socialist Alternative requesting to speak with Armstrong or any other available senior member in order to get further details on the agent's activities. None of these phone calls was returned.

Instead, the organisation posted an article on its web site on November 10 (also published in the latest version of their printed magazine), titled "Nothing new about cops spying on the left"—their first independent acknowledgement of the *Age's* revelations. Aside from an admission that the agent had "signed up as a member of Socialist Alternative" (something the *Age* had not made clear), there is no additional information regarding the cop and his actions.

The article, appearing under the by-line of Jerome Small, amounts to a criminally irresponsible underestimation of the seriousness of the police infiltration and the danger posed to left-wing organisations by state provocation. The essential argument is that police infiltration is as old as the socialist movement itself, that nothing can be done to prevent it or to minimise its impact ("So long as we're out to change the world, people paid to lie and spy will never be far away"), and that it is not that much of a problem anyway—"Despite the activities of the latest wannabe James Bond outed by the *Age*, Socialist Alternative has continued to grow."

This dismissive attitude and flippant tone reflect the organisation's entirely unserious and opportunist petty bourgeois protest politics.

The Socialist Alternative leadership nevertheless has a responsibility to the working class—not to mention to its own membership—to make public all it knows regarding the identity and activities of the agent provocateur formerly working within its ranks.

Among the questions that need to be addressed are the following:

* What is the agent's name? Are photographs of him available?

* When and how did he first approach Socialist Alternative? How did he become a member? Did he hold any elected or leading positions within the organisation?

* Did he engage in any provocative behaviour? How did he conduct himself at the APEC demonstrations?

* Are there any grounds for believing that the agent's activities assisted the series of raids by anti-terror police on students' homes in the lead up to APEC? Or that his activities during the demonstration contributed to the police targeting and arresting of protestors that day?

* When and why did the agent cease his membership with Socialist Alternative? Did anyone have any suspicions about him? If so, were these raised with any of the other organisations subsequently infiltrated?



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