

US: New reports of police spying on activist groups

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Political activist Brandon Darby has been revealed as a confidential informant for the FBI. Darby, 32, of Austin, Texas, is best-known as a co-founder of the Common Ground Collective, a loose-knit group of radicals and activists which organized relief efforts in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Information regarding Darby's status as an FBI informant came to light during preparations for the trial of David McKay and Bradley Crowder, two Austin, Texas natives charged with possession of Molotov cocktails in the run-up to the 2008 Republican National Convention held September 1-4 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota.

It was revealed in court documents that Darby provided the information that led to the arrest of the two protesters. The McKay-Crowder trial is set to begin January 26 in Minnesota and, if convicted, both men could serve up to 30 years in prison though no violence ever occurred.

Darby has confirmed his status as an informant in an open letter circulated on the Internet, saying, "The simple truth is that I have chosen to work with the Federal Bureau of Investigation." Speaking with the *New York Times*, Darby added that working with the FBI was "a good moral way to use [his] time."

Darby's surveillance operation began some 18 months before the Republican National Convention (RNC). Roughly six months before the convention he came into contact with McKay and Crowder. In addition to his reports on the two men, Darby's program of surveillance included providing the FBI with detailed observations of meetings, along with biographies and physical descriptions of other activists in Austin, Texas, as well as in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Darby often wore a recording device and attended the Republican National

Convention with a transmitter tucked into his belt.

Darby's undercover surveillance of activists during the RNC—and one can safely assume he was not alone in his efforts—was an essential component in the broader anti-democratic assault on protesters during the 2008 convention. That event saw a wave of suppression and intimidation of dissenters in the form of mass arrests and raids of protest headquarters in which hundreds were taken into custody and large amounts of computers, literature, and other materials confiscated. Darby, writing of his participation in the investigations, "strongly stands behind [his] choices in this matter."

In addition to new information on the RNC informant, details have also come to light this week regarding widespread police spying in Maryland. Reports show police have spied on numerous organizations in the area, including Amnesty International, the DC Anti-War Network, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and others, such as consumer groups objecting to rate increases on local utilities.

The activist groups in Maryland became the subject of investigation as early as 2005 as part of operations conducted by the administration of Republican Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr. Under these operations, initiated to "assess the threat to public safety by various protest groups, and identify high threat groups for continued monitoring," citizens were unjustly labeled as terrorists, and information collected on them during surveillance was shared with federal authorities. No arrests were made as a result of the investigations and no acts of violence were committed by the groups or individuals under investigation.

The incidents surrounding Brandon Darby and the surveillance programs in Maryland are only the latest examples of increased police spying on activist groups

in the United States. Since the attacks of September 11, the widest possible means of domestic spying have been pursued by the Bush administration and Congress, always under the pretext of the "war on terror." But far from protecting American citizens from acts of terrorism, such police-state measures have been put into place to combat the true threat to the ruling elite in the US—not terrorists, but the American working class.

There is no reason to believe such methods will abate under the incoming Obama administration. Under the deepening economic crisis—which has already begun to drive workers into struggle, such as in the recent occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago—the infiltration of workers', left-wing and socialist organizations will become an even more vital tool wielded by the US ruling elite. The revelations surrounding Brandon Darby and the Maryland investigations should serve as a stark warning to all those opposing government policies.



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