US: Republican activist behind Acorn smear campaign faces felony charges

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Four right-wing activists were arrested last Monday on charges of tampering with the telephone system in the New Orleans office of Louisiana Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu. If convicted on felony trespass charges they face penalties of up to $250,000 in fines and 10 years in prison.

The leader of the group was James O'Keefe, the Republican activist who became a hero in extreme right-wing circles last year after he carried out a provocative sting-type operation last summer against the community action organization Acorn. Working with an associate, with whom he posed as a pimp and prostitute, O'Keefe secretly videotaped several Acorn staffers giving him financial advice on how to set up a brothel. This stunt, endlessly replayed on Fox News and other media outlets, became a *cause célèbre* for the ultra-right.

Arrested along with O'Keefe were Joseph Basel, Robert Flanagan and Stan Dai, all 24 years old. Three of the men got their political training as right-wing student activists, O'Keefe at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Basel at one of the campuses of the University of Minnesota and Dai at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Flanagan is the son of the acting US Attorney for the Western District of Louisiana.

On January 25, the four men went to Senator Landrieu's office. Basel and Flanagan, wearing "blue denim pants, blue work shirts, light green fluorescent vests, tool belts, and construction-style hard hats," according to the federal complaint, attempted to pass themselves off as telephone repairmen who had left their identification outside in their car.

O'Keefe had appeared earlier, telling someone in the office that he was waiting for someone, and he was "holding a cellular phone so as to record" video of Basel and Flanagan. Dai, meanwhile, waited in a car outside, equipped with a walkie-talkie for communication with his fellow activists.

The men asked to be directed to the telephone closet to work on the building's phone system. They were then arrested. After appearing in court on January 26, they were released on $10,000 bond apiece, and are due back in court February 12.

Some earlier reports suggested that the incident involved an attempt to wiretap the Senator's phones. Lawyers for the accused men denied the wiretap claim, and the charge makes no mention of wiretapping. Nevertheless, entering the office and seeking to tamper with equipment that is the property of the federal government still subjects the men to felony charges.

The actual motive behind the incident may be connected to earlier complaints that voters had been unable to get through to the senator's office to voice their opposition to her vote in support of the Obama-backed health care legislation. Landrieu explained some weeks ago that her phone lines had been jammed by a large volume of calls. According to one report, O'Keefe and his confederates were seeking video images that they might use in some fashion similar to their earlier campaign against Acorn, perhaps showing Landrieu's staff unconcerned about alleged telephone problems.

The New Orleans incident sheds some light on the murky and corrupt world of capitalist politics and in particular the bitter behind-the-scenes dirty tricks campaigns that are largely the specialty of sections of the Republican right.

O'Keefe's modus operandi was developed in the world of right-wing campus politics. A well-funded outfit named the Leadership Institute trains students

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and in some cases helps them launch right-wing campus newspapers. O'Keefe worked on one such paper at Rutgers, the *Centurion*. One student who worked with him there told the *New York Times* this week, "James always said, 'Journalism is putting a camera in someone's face until they do something stupid.'"

A pattern has taken shape in recent decades and nearly 40 years after Watergate it continues and deepens. The ultra-right takes the offensive against its bourgeois political opponents, using such techniques as talk radio to launch McCarthy-type denunciations and setting the stage for provocations such as the latest one. The media, especially since the rise of Fox News, takes the ammunition that is supplied to it and manufactures a scandal. Fox sets the precedent and the more "moderate" sections of the media follow obediently, as they did in the case of the campaign against CBS anchor Dan Rather back in 2004, and on numerous other occasions since. And the Democrats meekly fall in line.

This is exactly what took place in the Acorn "scandal" last year. After some failed efforts, O'Keefe apparently found some Acorn staffers who could be captured on video saying things that would embarrass the parent organization. One of these people later claimed she thought the incident was a joke. The use of video equipment without permission appears to have been in violation of the law, but the titillation and scandal of the performances overrode other considerations, at least at first.

The Democrats panicked—failing, of course, to expose the political reasons for the Republican tactics and defend democratic rights in a principled fashion. They ran for cover, with the House and Senate overwhelmingly passing legislation to ban federal funding of Acorn. Last December a federal judge ruled that this legislation was an unconstitutional "bill of attainder," directed at punishing a single organization that had not been found guilty of any misconduct.

The Acorn escapade had the desired effect of further emboldening the ultra-right and besmirching the very idea of community action and the registration of poor and minority workers to vote. Acorn, a liberal protest group, became a target because its voter registration efforts tended to enroll voters more likely to cast ballots for the Democrats. The campaign against Acorn never revealed a single instance of voter fraud, but only the fact that in massive voter registration drives individuals often sign up using false names.

As far back as 2006, after the midterm election reverses for the Republicans, the Bush administration removed or attempted to remove several US Attorneys because they had refused to undertake politically motivated campaigns against "voter fraud" in their jurisdictions. In the 2008 election, Republican candidate John McCain made alleged Acorn voter fraud a main plank of his unsuccessful campaign.

It is possible that O'Keefe, flush with his recent successes, has clumsily overreached. Even right-wing spokesmen like talk radio host Glenn Beck and blogger Michelle Malkin have distanced themselves from the New Orleans caper.

For the most part, however, the media shows no sign of waging the kind of relentless campaign that it did over the Acorn story, even though that was a manufactured scandal and the crimes alleged in New Orleans involve real lawbreaking.

There is also a possibility that more lies behind this incident than meets the eye. The fact that Louisiana has two US Attorneys and that the office of one has arrested the son of the other is certainly an unusual event. Federal authorities are continuing to interview the arrested men and it is possible that more information will surface on the connections between them and higher political circles.

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