

Britain: Observer exposes police spy in the Socialist Party

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A secret police operative, “Officer A”, spent years spying on the Socialist Party of England and Wales’ predecessor organisation, the Militant group, and its youth organisation, Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE), in the mid-1990s, according to the *Observer* newspaper.

Officer A was part of a covert police unit known as the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), an adjunct of the secret intelligence service MI5. The SDS employed around 10 full-time undercover officers to infiltrate and disrupt left and anti-racist organisations from at least 1968, when large anti-Vietnam protests erupted on the streets of London.

The *Observer* explains how Officer A joined the police straight from school in 1986, where he had “discovered an interest in political ideology and public affairs” and developed an ambition to join the secret service.

No doubt Officer A’s anti-communist sympathies marked him out as a suitable candidate for the intelligence services. But his lack of university education precluded a career in the upper class environs of MI5, and he was advised to work in Special Branch instead. He spent his first four years working in counterterrorism in Northern Ireland, gaining valuable experience for his later role.

Officer A’s work in the SDS started in the early 1990s, when working class districts of London began to organise against repeated fascist attacks and a series of beatings and deaths of black people in police custody. Anger exploded when teenager Stephen Lawrence was knifed to death in 1993 in an unprovoked attack by five white youths whilst he was waiting for a friend at a bus stop. As Officer A admits, the state feared “losing control” and the SDS were sent in to “target” the new groups that had been formed.

Officer A was given a new identity and an apartment to live in, while he set about befriending a student anti-racism activist in YRE. He describes how, “You get given a file on your target that tells you everything you need to know. You become that person’s brother. You know everything that makes them tick. You know how much they like to drink, you know where they like to drink. You know what kind of music they like, you know what kind of women they like. You become the brother they never knew they had. None of it is ever said to the target, it’s far more subtle than that. The first time they get in the car, it will be just the right kind of music playing. The first time a redhead walks by it will be: ‘God, I’m really into redheads’. It’s all done fantastically cleverly”.

For four years Officer A lived the life of a “deep swimmer”, completely absorbed in the life of his targets. He became their comrade, friend or lover and admits to forming sexual relationships with two women in the group in order to obtain intelligence.

Within a short space of time Officer A had become a YRE branch secretary, where he would have known everything about the organisation’s membership, campaign plans and finances.

As the *Observer* explains, “Once inside the groups they were ordered to infiltrate, it was relatively easy for SDS officers to rise to the top, because they were often prepared to work long hours on boring, administrative jobs. Often they tried to become membership secretaries or treasurers, where their position gave them access to the records and secret agendas that were so useful to the security services. Often more efficient than those around them, operatives had to strike a balance to ensure they did not end up running the organisations they were trying to destroy”.

Officer A reveals how the SDS operated totally outside the law: “If I were a regular police officer and I wanted to plant a bug in your house or your office, I would need to get all kinds of permissions. But the SDS can put a person in your car, in your house, in your life for 24 hours a day for five years, and nobody outside the SDS will know anything about it.

“Unlike regular undercover officers, members of the SDS do not have to gather evidence with a view to prosecuting their targets. This enables them to witness and even engage in criminal activity without fear of disciplinary action or compromising a subsequent court case”.

Soon after he made contact with the YRE and his target, Officer A claims he gained his spurs as a provocateur. What began as a small demonstration turned, with his help, into a violent attack on the police. “That day developed into a major ruck”, he says. “At the end no one would have believed I was a police officer.

“If anyone had accused me [of being a police officer] there would have been a dozen people willing to come forward and swear it wasn’t true. We were all buzzing when it was over”, said Officer A. “We couldn’t wait for the next event. Because of what we’d all been through, I was accepted by them right away”.

Officer A didn’t have to wait long. Two weeks later, he took part in a much larger demonstration in the London suburb of Welling, outside the headquarters of the British National Party, which had also been infiltrated by the SDS. Officer A, who had found out that the demo was going to be much larger than expected, was in “a group of hardcore protesters” that stormed police lines. Dozens of protestors were injured and arrested following repeated police baton charges, and politicians and the media had a field day trying to discredit demonstrations and demanding they be banned.

The SDS had been such a “success” that then Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, praised them personally. Many of the current police tactics at demonstrations are derived from the Welling operation, Officer A states, including the use of “kettling”, whereby

police corral protesters for hours at a time. A similar tactic at the G20 demonstration last summer in London led to the death of newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson after he was brutally assaulted by a masked police officer.

The story of Officer A was revealed because he sued the Metropolitan Police and won an out of court settlement after claiming he had suffered post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his undercover activities. Officer A says he began to crack up when the Labour government was forced to announce an inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in July 1997, because “there was concern that my role within the campaigns might emerge during the inquiry”. However, his personal involvement in this case (which remains unsolved) is not elaborated on, and in the event the SDS kept quiet about his role and said nothing to the inquiry.

Officer A also claims that his ill-health developed over worries about the anti-democratic nature of his activities.

The intention of the *Observer* in publishing the case of Officer A is not to expose but to condone state infiltration of legal political parties. The protestors who demanded an end to the Vietnam War are described as “hate-filled subversives”. Without a shred of evidence anti-fascist activists are described as just as willing to use violence as their opponents in the BNP and other far-right groups. The imagination of *Observer* journalist Tony Thompson becomes particularly fevered when he writes of Officer A, “Week after week, year in and year out, he lived and breathed the life of a hardcore Trotskyist agitator with a passion for heavy drinking, a deep-seated hatred of the police and a predilection for extreme violence”.

The response of the Socialist Party to this expose has been characterised by an extraordinary degree of complacency.

Lois Austin, the chair at the time of Officer A’s infiltration, told the *Observer*, “We believe there should be a public inquiry into police tactics at demonstrations. It should be independent, not one where the police investigate themselves. We want to know about their use of spies and whether this unit is still operational”.

This demand is an evasion. Officer A’s revelations have certainly given a glimpse of the type of surveillance, spying and destabilisation operations that are routinely carried out against the working class, civil rights organisations and any group deemed to be a threat to the interests of the ruling elite. But specifically they have exposed a four-year infiltration of the YRE and the Militant. The SP, therefore, has a responsibility to launch an internal inquiry into the activities of Officer A and to publish its findings.

Instead, a generalised call for an “independent inquiry”, to be organised by persons unspecified into “police tactics” is raised, coupled with a call for a struggle “over the coming years” for the disbandment of the SDS and other similar units and to make the police democratically accountable.

The public statements of SP leaders and the organisation itself all seek to downplay the significance of the Officer A’s infiltration and do nothing to either illuminate or educate.

The fake identity of Officer A is known to the SP. The SP’s Greg Randall wrote to the *Observer* saying that he remembered Officer A as “Peter”, who had belonged to a group at Kingsway College calling itself the Revolutionary Internationalist League before joining Militant. Current SP General Secretary Hannah Sell, who was YRE secretary in 1992-1996, identifies him in a commissioned piece for the *Guardian* as “Peter Daley”.

Knowing his false identity, Officer A’s photo could and should be published, and as detailed an account as possible should be assembled

of his contacts and activities. His word on what he was involved in or with whom he collaborated cannot be taken at face value.

Instead of such basic procedures being followed, Randall merely describes Peter as a “diffident individual who appeared unhappy in his own skin”—who “seems to have come out of this the worst, being misused by his police bosses, as his subsequent ill health would show.

“One has to have some sympathy for him”, he declares.

Randall also insists that “Peter” failed in his activities because, “Our campaigns weren’t disrupted...and didn’t end because of police infiltration”.

An official statement by the SP, “State infiltration—a warning to the workers’ movement”, similarly asserts that though Officer A argued “for brawling with the BNP, indicating that he was attempting to play the role of provocateur”, “He had no effect”.

Officer A may not have succeeded in staging a provocation on this or that occasion, but that does not detract from the fact that he was able to stay inside the YRE for four years, gathering information, names and addresses and passing on these details to his handlers. This, in most circumstances, is the major activity of an agent. The opportunity for more major disruption, such as creating the conditions for arrests or destabilising an organisation from within, is rarer but cannot be discounted.

The SP concludes its statement with the bald assertion that “When movements are sufficiently powerful, neither state repression or [sic] infiltration will stop them”.

This superficially optimistic pronouncement is another and equally serious evasion of political responsibility. State agents and provocateurs can have a devastating impact on an organisation, long before it becomes such a powerful and unstoppable force. In the most important example of all, the penetration of the Fourth International by Stalinist agents cost the lives of Leon Trotsky, his son Leon Sedov and many other key leaders in the pre-war years. In the 1960s and 1970s, literally hundreds of agents were sent into the Socialist Workers Party in the United States and a particular group came to constitute the organisation’s central leadership and to determine its political line.

The exposure of the activities of agents such as Officer A is an elementary measure in helping to defeat ongoing efforts at police infiltration and provocations, and in educating workers and young people in an understanding of the activities of the secret state.

The authors also recommend:

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 8
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