

Revealing episode from the history of the civil rights movement

Ernest Withers and the FBI

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The name Ernest Withers is known to only a small number of people—participants in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, historians and photographers. His work, however, includes iconic images of these early struggles and is known to many millions. It was Withers who covered the trial in the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, and who took the famous photo of the striking sanitation workers in Memphis carrying signs declaring, “I Am a Man.” He was with Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the day the civil rights leader was assassinated.

It was thus of some historical importance when the *Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tennessee, revealed earlier this month that Withers, who died three years ago at the age of 85, had been an informant for the FBI.

The newspaper’s announcement came after a two-year investigation and was in part the result of an accident, a clerical error by the authorities. The FBI released some reports in response to a request under the federal Freedom of Information Act. As is very often the case with such reports, the government blacked out most of the information, especially that involving the identities of its agents and informants. Apparently, however, in a few instances the informant number of Withers, ME 338-R, was left visible. By piecing together information on Withers’ activities and matching it to this number, the newspaper unearthed the connection that the FBI had refused to acknowledge. An FBI spokesman refused to comment further except to say, “[F]rom time to time mistakes do happen.”

The Memphis paper, in fact, was given only a small portion of what is in the official files. It reported that Withers had been an informant from at least 1968 to 1970, but the relationship may have begun earlier and ended later. Withers provided photographs, biographical information and scheduling details to two FBI agents in

Memphis, Howell Lowe and William H. Lawrence. While he was undoubtedly not the only agent who provided information of this nature to the government, his closeness to the civil rights leadership, who called him Ernie and saw him on a regular basis, made him an important source of intelligence.

The media reports on this episode have focused primarily on the motives of Withers. The *Commercial Appeal* noted that he had eight children and needed financial help. Also significant is the fact that Withers had been fired from a job as a Memphis police officer for allegedly taking a kickback, and had also been convicted on a similar charge while working as an agent for the state Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

Another line of inquiry taken up in the wake of the FBI revelation is whether Withers’ role as an informant in some way detracts from the famous photos with which he is credited, or whether he should be defended or excused for his betrayal.

Characteristically for the US media, there has been no suggestion that the FBI infiltration of the civil rights movement should be the subject of further investigation, or that other individuals who collaborated in government spying and provocations against Dr. King and his associates should be identified and exposed.

Several surviving civil rights figures, including the Rev. Joseph Lowery, the longtime head of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, have expressed their “disappointment.” Others, like former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, who was US ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter, expressed no great concern, which is perhaps no surprise considering Young’s role for many decades as a pillar of the establishment and a representative of the US ruling elite.

This focus on Withers the individual trivializes and confuses the more important issues. Of course his history is important, but not for the purpose of studying his

personal psychology or debating the value of his work. The photographs speak for themselves, and clearly are not the work of someone sent in from outside or unaffected by the mass movement of this period. It is possible that something more extensive is still concealed, but more than likely Withers was a relatively small cog in the FBI's operations.

Much more important than what was going through Withers' mind is the issue of why his services were called for in the first place. The history of the civil rights movement has become shrouded in myth, part of the conscious effort to cover up the truth about the history of the working class and what mass struggles have accomplished in America.

Even in the context of its long record of provocation and vicious attacks on the democratic rights of immigrants, political dissidents, and every section of the working class, the FBI's surveillance of the civil rights movement and its campaign in particular against Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1960s is one of its foulest operations.

The FBI wiretapped King's hotel rooms, perhaps with the assistance of Withers' reports on schedules. It secured taped evidence of King's extramarital activities, sent this evidence to King's offices, and went so far as to send a note to King suggesting that he commit suicide to avoid disgrace.

This was among the filthiest of the FBI's activities during this period, although much still remains unknown, including possible government involvement in the 1968 assassination of King himself, as well as the murder of Malcolm X some three years earlier.

The revelation of Withers' involvement should be an occasion to review this actual history, but there is almost no mention of it in the media. Occasional references are accompanied by the suggestion that it was all part of the "excesses" of J. Edgar Hoover, the longtime FBI chief. But the wiretaps of King were authorized by then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. While Hoover was driven by pathological racism and anti-communism, he could never have carried out these activities if they did not correspond to the interests of the ruling class and its governing representatives in both major big business parties.

The official myth of the civil rights movement depicts King as a saint-like figure without politics and or an organic connection to the tumultuous mass movement that he led. He is usually portrayed only as a religious pacifist, conveniently ignoring both the diversity of political trends in a movement involving millions of people, and King's

own increasingly radical pronouncements, including his well-known denunciations of the Vietnam War and his call for mass struggle for jobs and against poverty.

King was a pacifist, and he never advocated a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. He was targeted by the FBI despite these limitations, not because of them. He was hated and feared because the movement in which he was the most prominent public figure posed grave dangers to the ruling elite.

It is this fact that official history seeks to obscure: that all of the gains in the struggle against segregation and racist brutality were the product of a mass movement, and not handed down by the government that today falsely claims to represent in some way the heritage of this struggle.

For obvious reasons the US ruling elite wants to deny this heritage, lest working people today draw the lessons of past struggles and revive their best traditions.

The story of Ernest Withers reminds us that the US government was on the opposite side of the barricades in every struggle by American working people for democratic rights and equality in the 20th Century. And that remains the case today. The real threats to democratic rights come from within the capitalist state itself, as last week's FBI raids on the homes of antiwar activists once again demonstrated.

At the same time, the exposure of Withers' role is a reminder of the contradictions and weaknesses of the civil rights movement. The struggles of the 1950s and 1960s never achieved the full social equality for which millions fought, because they were not consciously directed against the profit system and its political representatives in the Democratic Party. The goals for which workers fought and sacrificed require the building of a new revolutionary leadership that bases itself on these lessons.



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