FBI provocateur ensnares Cleveland protesters in “bomb plot”

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3 May 2012

Federal authorities Tuesday, May 1, charged five men described as “anarchists” with plotting to blow up a bridge linking two Cleveland, Ohio suburbs. The charges were the culmination of a six-month long sting operation involving a paid confidential informant that ended with undercover FBI operatives supplying the five with fake explosives and then arresting them.

An affidavit presented by the FBI to secure warrants for the arrests claims that the case grew out of a decision of the agency’s Cleveland office to send their informant into an Occupy Cleveland demonstration last October to investigate a “report of potential criminal activity and threats involving anarchists.”

The so-called “terrorist plot” traces its origins to this FBI fishing expedition and, as the affidavit makes clear, would never have existed outside of the agency’s informant and undercover operatives egging on the five defendants, organizing their activities and supplying them with the fake explosives.

The men arrested were identified as Brandon Baxter, 20, described by police as homeless, Douglas Wright, 26, Connor Stevens, 20, Joshua Stafford, 23 and Anthony Hayne, 35. All but Wright, who was said to be from Indianapolis, were from Cleveland or surrounding suburbs.

A report by a local television station, WKYC, suggested that some of the men had mental problems. It cited a police report from February that Baxter had “jumped in front of a car in the middle of the night and told the driver to kill me.”

Stafford’s mother described her son as someone who has “been troubled since he’s been young, been in and out of hospitals, prisons, jails. He’s just been a troubled soul since he’s been born.”

In its description of the Confidential Human Source, or informant, who has yet to be identified, the FBI affidavit states that he, or she, “has a criminal record including one conviction for possession of cocaine in 1990, one conviction for robbery in 1991, and four convictions for passing bad checks between 1991 and 2011.” The informant was paid $5,750 for his services and $550 for expenses.

This is a typical profile for the informers used by the FBI. They are individuals facing jail for criminal offenses who are offered leniency and cash in return for entrapping others in manufactured conspiracies. Such was the case with Shahed Hussain, a failed Pakistani immigrant businessman who was convicted of fraud and then asked to become an informer, trawling New York state’s Muslim immigrant communities and mosques for individuals who could be lured into conspiracies of the FBI’s invention. This produced two major “terrorist plots,” one in Albany involving alleged money laundering for purchase of a non-existent stinger missile, and one in Newburgh that centered on four black American Muslims, paid by and acting under the instructions of the informant, planting fake explosives at synagogues.

Recounting the Cleveland informant’s original meetings with those now charged with conspiracy and facing 25 year jail sentences, the affidavit cites casual conversations in which the five toss out ideas such as setting off smoke bombs or stink bombs and knocking bank signs off of downtown Cleveland buildings.

Their aim, according to the affidavit’s recounting of the informant’s report was “to send a message to corporations and the United States government.”

The informant was sent to meet with the five men targeted by the FBI wearing a concealed recording device. Even the portions of what the FBI presents as transcripts of recordings indicate that the informant worked deliberately to steer them toward the use of

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explosives.

For instance, Wright laughingly describes having read part of a book titled the "Anarchist Cookbook," stating, "We can make smoke bombs, we can make plastic explosives, we can make, like, we can—it teaches you how to pick locks. It does everything."

The informant responds, "How much money we need to make the plastic explosives." When Wright indicates that he has no idea, the informant presses him, "You gotta get with me, uh, if we gonna be trying to do something in a month you need to get with me as soon as possible on how much money we gonna need."

It is clear that from the outset the aim was to convince those charged to agree to buy "explosives" from undercover operatives to make the conspiracy case that had been invented by the FBI.

According to the affidavit, the informant suggested the bridge to be bombed, drove the defendants to it and convinced them that he had a "contact" who could sell them explosives.

At one point, the affidavit's version of the recording transcripts shows the informant pressing Baxter that decisions must be made because they "are not that far out from the operation, time-wise," and Baxter replying that he "was just throwing around ideas and does not know exactly what they should do."

This type of exchange is repeated in the course of the affidavit, indicating that the informant was the driving force in the so-called conspiracy, pressing the hapless "anarchists" to carry out actions that they had neither the inclination nor the ability to do on their own. Indeed, it is not clear whether the five even had access to a car, as the informant is repeatedly reported as driving them to the meetings with the undercovers, to the site of the bridge and elsewhere.

Clearly intimidated by Monday's arrests, the leadership of Occupy Cleveland responded by calling off a planned May Day demonstration in the city. It issued a statement acknowledging that the five "had participated in Occupy Cleveland events," but "were in no way representing or acting on behalf of Occupy Cleveland."

The affidavit presented in Cleveland outlines a scenario virtually identical to the numerous terror cases manufactured by the FBI through sting operations targeting Muslims. As in these cases, the defendants in Cleveland were targeted not because of any criminal action that they had committed, but rather because of ideas that they expressed, which, in a confused manner, indicated opposition to US corporations and the government.

As with scores of Muslims who have been framed up and jailed, they were lured by an informer and undercover agents into playing assigned roles in a crime that was staged and controlled from the outset by the FBI.

The government's purpose in staging these operations in relation to Muslims in the US is clear. They are designed to lend substance to the so-called war on terror, justifying wars of aggression abroad and increased surveillance and repression within the US itself in the name of "keeping Americans safe" from a supposedly ubiquitous threat of Al Qaeda attack.

What is the government's aim in now turning these same methods against alleged anarchists expressing hostility to corporate America?

After the five men were arraigned in federal court in shackles and leg irons Tuesday afternoon, US Attorney Steven Dettelbach told a press conference that, "This case demonstrates that the threat we face is a diverse one; that terrorism can come in many hues and from many homelands."

This is a warning. Under conditions of protracted economic crisis and growing social unrest, the government is preparing to use the police state methods it developed in the "war on terror" to intimidate and suppress any challenge to the rule of the corporations and the financial elite in America. Judging from the government's own affidavit, the entrapment of the hapless "anarchists" in Cleveland is a test run of this strategy.

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