

Urban Shield exercises in Boston test police-state tactics

John Marion
13 November 2012

Boston-area news outlets did their best to give mundane coverage to a chilling announcement earlier this month: that Boston police S.W.A.T. teams, along with public transit police, the Coast Guard, “intelligence” personnel, bomb disposal units, and other forces would be conducting exercises in subway stations, abandoned movie theaters, and other public locations. Residents were told not to worry about the sound of gunfire during the exercises set for November 3.

The Urban Shield exercises are funded by the US Department of Homeland Security and have also been held in cities in California over the past two years. Funding is through Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) grants, a program established in response to Barack Obama’s 2011 Presidential Policy Directive 8, titled “National Preparedness.”

While Urban Shield includes exercises designed to simulate natural disasters and disease outbreaks, its emphasis clearly is on police tactics and “security.” A video about Urban Shield Boston on the web site vimeo.com features scenes of heavily armed police invading buildings, hostage takers being shot, and armored police vehicles rumbling through city streets.

The Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC), through which Boston police and the FBI coordinate their spying on peaceful protests, is affiliated with Urban Shield through the Metro Boston Homeland Security Region. On that region’s web site, BRIC boasts that it “effectively gathers data from a variety of resources; investigates, manages and synthesizes collected data; analyzes the results; and produces timely, relevant analytical products.”

The nature of these “products” is spelled out in a report issued by the Massachusetts ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) in October. Included are the interrogation of peaceful protesters, reports classifying free speech as a homeland security threat, and the use of infiltrators to spy on nonviolent antiwar organizations. News of the ACLU report was carried by news outlets the day after its release, but was then quickly buried.

Boston Mayor Tom Menino, a Democrat, and his administration are deeply involved in both Urban Shield and the spying activities. Menino has a history of suppressing free speech: When Boston hosted the Democratic National Convention in 2004 he championed the use of “free speech zones” in which protesters were confined in small areas behind concrete and chain-link fences.

Of the Urban Shield: Boston exercises, Menino said in a statement that they “set a national example for cities around the country to create a coordinated full-scale training exercise.”

The ACLU released a video with its report, in which an activist describes being interrogated by the Boston police, the FBI, and a Homeland Security agent after she was arrested in a “die-in” outside the Israeli consulate at Park Plaza. A total of four officers grilled her in a holding room, demanding information on future plans and the names of other activists, while also trying to force her to become an informant.

The ACLU report notes that, “when the National Lawyers Guild asked the BPD [Boston Police

Department] for records of this interrogation, the BPD responded that there were none.” The ACLU and National Lawyers Guild (NLG) had to sue in order to obtain the reports that the police had, in fact, kept.

Mirroring the Obama administration’s use of the “state secrets” doctrine to prevent judicial review of its spying activities, the BPD tried to block release of its “intelligence reports” by citing Massachusetts General Law and claiming that the release “would jeopardize public safety.” The police also claimed that “investigatory” documents do not need to be released, even though the majority of activities described in their reports involved no crime.

The ACLU states that, “police officers assigned to the BRIC create and retain ‘intelligence reports’ detailing purely non-criminal political acts—such as handing out flyers and attending anti-war rallies.” In one such report, a March 2007 talk by Howard Zinn, Cindy Sheehan, and City Councillor Felix Arroyo, was labeled a “Criminal Act.” In another, a counter-protest at a Sarah Palin rally on Boston Common is labeled “HomeSec Domestic.”

Records released to the ACLU indicate that the police subscribe to activists’ email lists, keep track of individuals who attend events, and use informants to infiltrate nonviolent groups. According to a March 2007 document, for example, a Lt. McDermott of the Brookline, Mass. police department “spoke with a source in the activist community who stated that the various anti-wars groups are hoping for a large turnout this weekend. The source also stated that several buses will be coming to Boston from outside of the New England area.”

It would be difficult to determine how much government funding goes to such spying activities. However, the ACLU quotes a US Senate subcommittee report that “found that DHS may have allocated over a billion dollars towards the construction of offices like the BRIC nationwide. Its investigation also found that the states spent four times what the federal government contributed towards the development of these ‘fusion centers.’”

Urban Shield, with its use of a myriad of government agencies and DHS support, has an even murkier budget. Nonetheless, the agencies participating in it are diverting public funds despite the decaying infrastructure in the area. The MBTA, which runs the subways and public buses in the Boston area, has a chronic shortfall of \$3 billion in its maintenance budget and significantly hiked its fares in July. Such worries did not keep it from sending its transit police officers to an abandoned movie theater for an exercise simulating a bank robbery.

Another Urban Shield exercise, held in Boston Harbor, simulated the protection of cruise ships from terrorists, in essence preparing to protect the profits of the cruise lines. The defense of profit is also implied in Obama’s Presidential Policy Directive 8, which defines “security” as “the protection of the Nation and its...vital interests.”

The police documents obtained by the ACLU span the period 2007-2011, well into Obama’s first term, and Urban Shield began under his watch. The ACLU report does not advance a perspective to counter these governmental activities. Instead, it calls the spying “counterproductive,” and attempts to argue that the FBI can track terrorists more efficiently than the BRIC.

It quotes a US Senate subcommittee report about the lack of good information coming from “fusion centers,” and quotes a DHS official who told the Senate that fusion centers produce “a bunch of crap.” The existence of such infighting points only to the corrupt nature of the police-state apparatus



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact