

Hidden-camera footage shows police attempt to spy on UK students

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On November 14, the *Guardian* newspaper published secretly-filmed footage showing an attempt by police to recruit an activist to spy on political organisations and protest groups at Cambridge University.

The footage points to an attempt to “launch a secret operation to spy on the political activities of students at Cambridge University,” according to the *Guardian*.

The anonymous activist was met by a police officer, part of a covert union, who sought to convince him to become an informant in exchange for cash. The activist used a hidden camera to record the conversation, which he turned over to the *Guardian*.

The officer asks him to concentrate on “student union type stuff” because “the things they discuss can have an impact on community issues.” But the aim was much more widespread surveillance. The officer went on to ask the student to gather information the leaders of protests, the numbers traveling from the local area to national or regional demonstrations, and the vehicles in which they were going. He also requested details on political groups, including local campaign organizations set up by students to oppose increases in tuition fees and the privatization of education by the government.

The officer made clear that the aim of the operation was to target all political opposition. Explaining the tasks that would be expected of a spy, he told the young man, “It will be a case of you going to meetings... how many people were there, who was the main speaker, who was giving the talks, what was your assessment of the talk, was it a case of—were they trying to cause problems or were they trying to help people, you know, those sort of things.”

As well as detail on the political character of various groups, the activist was told to gather information on plans for protests and who was organizing them. The officer suggested that he use Facebook for this and other social media portals. This removed the need of the police

to break the law, he went on, by hacking into students’ accounts.

The police responded to the revelations with a statement implying that students were engaging in criminal behavior. Refusing to divulge the covert unit for which the officer worked, Cambridgeshire police commented, “Officers use covert tactics to gather intelligence, in accordance with the law, to assist in the prevention and detection of criminal activity.”

Cambridgeshire Chief of Police Simon Parr told the BBC that the surveillance was entirely justified in order to “keep the public safe.”

“The only way we know if there are things we need to be interested in is by trying to find out,” he said. On this basis, surveillance against the entire population can be justified. From the point of view of the police, everyone is a suspect.

Over 100 academics issued an open letter to Cambridge University’s Chancellor, in which the police action was described as “chilling.”

“We ask that you issue an official statement condemning such covert practices, which infringe the traditional boundaries of university self-governance,” it read. No response has been forthcoming.

The purpose of such surveillance was starkly illustrated on the same day the story was revealed. At a protest called on the campus of the University of London, police detained the demonstration’s leader Michael Chessum for failing to have notified authorities about the planned route of the action. Chessum was one of the leading organizers of the National Campaign against Fees and Cuts, which seeks to pressure the major parties and the National Union of Students through protest actions. According to his bail terms, Chessum is not permitted to take part in a demonstration on the campus of an educational institution, or anywhere within half a mile of one.

Earlier this year, a female student was arrested by police

at the same institution for drawing a slogan in chalk on a wall. University authorities called in the police after the statement appeared, which called for support to be given to workers at the university who were working without fixed contracts and sick pay.

Such actions are part of a concerted drive by the ruling elite to eliminate democratic rights and intimidate all forms of political and social opposition. Successive governments have virtually done away with the right to protest and right of freedom of assembly under the guise of the “war on terror.”

The response from ruling circles to Edward Snowden’s revelations has been to impose new limits on free speech and press freedoms, threatening anyone who speaks out against the vast build-up of a police state apparatus with prosecution.

The uncovered police operation is only the tip of the iceberg. As well as the virtually limitless surveillance carried out by the intelligence services of emails, telephone calls, internet browsing records and any other form of digital communication, police infiltration of political groups is central to the government’s targeting of any opposition to its policies of militarism abroad and intensifying attacks on social programmes and democratic rights at home.

Government representatives sought to strike a pose of concern and surprise at the latest spying revelations. Vince Cable, business secretary in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, described the actions of the police at Cambridge University as “worrying.” Julian Huppert, the Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge, stated, “It concerns me greatly that an undercover officer was trying to pit student against student in this way. I cannot see any justification for this.”

Such comments come from a government that oversees one of the most extensive surveillance systems in the world and has stood firm against any attempt to expose its criminal machinations. The scale of the programme indicated by the leaked footage suggests at the very least that the government would have been aware of its existence.

It is clear that the operation in Cambridge is replicated across the country. The officer described the process whereby information passed to him by the prospective informant would be funneled to national authorities in the lead up to major demonstrations or political action. He disingenuously claimed that far from being used by the police to “target people, round them all up and arrest them,” such information would merely be used at

demonstrations by officers to “put measures in place to keep them off the road and things.”

The record proves otherwise. For decades, police have used similar covert surveillance techniques to infiltrate political organizations, protest groups and activist networks to gather information on their participants and launch provocations. An investigation launched into police procedures released a report earlier this year revealing that these practices had been in use since 1968, and that the identities of dead children had been used as cover for covert officers. Officers had gone so far as to have personal relationships with members of the organizations they targeted, and in some cases even fathered children. Informants had used their false IDs to testify in court.

Police have also brutally attacked student demonstrations. In 2010, when mass protests developed against the increase in tuition fees, hundreds were arrested in London and others injured as a result of police violence.

The attempts to step up the surveillance of students and young people reflects the fears in ruling circles over the explosive social tensions in Britain today. With record high levels of youth joblessness, skyrocketing student indebtedness and unprecedented levels of social inequality, they are terrified that a political perspective which challenges the existing set-up could win mass support.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the UK is holding a series of meetings to discuss the assault on democratic rights by the ruling class and the vast surveillance apparatus which has been revealed by Snowden’s exposures. We urge all those looking for a way to combat this danger to make plans to attend.



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