

Al Sharpton: FBI informer and proud of it

Dan Brennan
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At last week's National Action Network annual convention in New York City there was no shortage of high-profile politicians hobnobbing with the organization's founder and president, Al Sharpton. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and Attorney General Eric Holder all made appearances at the event. Business leaders, like McDonald's CEO Don Thompson, and union bigwigs such as Gerry Hudson, vice president of SEIU, were honored with awards. The gathering of rich and powerful was capped off by President Obama's keynote speech on Friday.

The Democratic Party establishment's full-scale embrace of Sharpton came on the heels of new revelations detailing his integration into the US intelligence apparatus at the outset of his career. Just prior to the convention's opening, *The Smoking Gun* web site published a detailed account of his role as an informant for the FBI and New York Police Department.

Referred to in official records as Confidential Informer number 7, or CI-7, Sharpton proved a useful asset during several police operations in the 1980s. Information supplied by Sharpton, including recordings from a wired briefcase he carried to meetings with low-level mobsters, were subsequently used to get court authorization for phone taps on the notorious Genovese crime family.

According to *The Smoking Gun* report, the FBI was able to turn Sharpton into an informant after he was caught in videotaped discussions with a drug trafficker. His ties to New York's corrupt music and boxing industries, not to mention connections with political activists, made him an attractive target for flipping into an "asset."

This is not the first time reports have surfaced about Sharpton's collaboration with the FBI. A press account of Sharpton's participation in an investigation into

boxing promoter Don King initially appeared during the Tawana Brawley affair, in which Sharpton gained notoriety as the public mouthpiece for fraudulent rape allegations. Since then, the issue sporadically reemerged, though many of the details remained hidden.

Sharpton, while denying some of the specifics, admitted to a relationship with the FBI. "I was never told I was an informant with a number," he said. "In my own mind, I was not an informant. I was cooperating with an investigation." He claimed he went voluntarily to the FBI after receiving threats for helping black concert promoters to get a larger share of business in the music industry. "If I provided all the information they claimed I provided," he added, "I should be given a ticker-tape parade."

Mayor de Blasio immediately came to Sharpton's defense, saying the revelation "doesn't change the relationship one bit. I'm very proud to be his friend. I think he has done a lot of good for the City of New York and this country."

De Blasio went on to praise Sharpton's role in protesting the "stop and frisk" tactics of the New York City Police Department. De Blasio's predecessor Michael Bloomberg relied heavily upon the strategy, in which police each year made hundreds of thousands of baseless stops and searches, targeting minority youth in working class neighborhoods and holding them in a virtual police state.

Since coming to office, de Blasio has shifted tactics. While not completely abandoning stop and frisks—the newly appointed police chief, William Bratton, is credited with beginning the practice during his previous stint as commissioner under the law-and-order demagogue Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—de Blasio has greatly scaled back its use, reckoning that staying the course could provoke a social explosion.

Sharpton's intervention in stop and frisk, not to

mention the response to the murder of Trayvon Martin and dozens of other potentially explosive provocations over the years, has been aimed at promoting himself in the media while containing the popular response within the safe confines of capitalist politics. His empty demagoguery is tailored above all to covering up fundamental class issues and channeling everything along racial lines.

Sharpton's history of collaboration with the FBI and NYPD confirms that he is someone that the state can count on. Indeed, he has shown his willingness to play whatever role necessary for self-preservation and self-enrichment. But it also explodes any pretense that this huckster or his ilk can possibly stand at the fore of any popular movement against oppression. The daily experience of workers and youth with these instruments of class rule—from the spying on Muslims, the frame-ups to justify the “war on terror,” or the unceasing spate of police shootings and violence—stands at the other end of the social spectrum.

The anointed “civil rights leaders” of today occupy a completely different social role than those of two generations ago, who led a mass struggle against racial segregation. Far from touting their connections with the US intelligence service, leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. were hounded by the FBI, set up, blackmailed and threatened with assassination. King, in particular as he began to criticize the war in Vietnam and fight against poverty, drew the ire of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who considered him “the most dangerous Negro in America.”

Nonetheless the shortcomings of that movement—ultimately the failure to extend the struggle against racial injustice into one against economic inequality and capitalism as a whole—created a vacuum in which demagogues like Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and others could eventually rise. Today, their chief concern is ensuring space for a thin layer of African Americans to access the spoils of capitalism. Sharpton himself has become a multimillionaire, scoring a lucrative position on cable news and demanding five-figure compensation for speaking appearances.

The politics of this layer directly translates into the most crass defense of exploitation under Obama, even as the first black president spearheads an assault on the working class. From slashing food stamps to cutting government jobs, many of these attacks are hitting

African American workers especially hard. Today's poverty rates for blacks approach 30 percent, little better from those that prevailed in the 1970s.

However, the conditions confronting black workers, from falling living standards to the dismantling of democratic rights, are felt acutely throughout the entire working class, regardless of race. A genuine opposition requires a clean break from all those who seek to divide workers across racial, ethnic and national lines, and a united struggle of workers of all backgrounds for social equality.



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