

New York cops spied on activists against police violence

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A report published last week in Glenn Greenwald's *Intercept* has revealed that police spied and exchanged information on activists who led protests against police violence last winter in New York City.

The spying was conducted by a special counterterrorism squad from police working for the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the Intelligence Division of the New York Police Department (NYPD).

The protests erupted after the refusal of a grand jury to indict NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo for the murder of Eric Garner. Pantaleo was videotaped strangling Garner during a targeted arrest for allegedly selling tax-free cigarettes in the borough of Staten Island on July 17 last year.

As he lay on the ground, Garner told police officers on the scene several times that he could not breathe. He was given no first aid and was pronounced dead at the hospital. His death was later ruled a homicide by the city coroner's office.

Activists obtained 118 pages of police reports from the MTA and 161 pages from the Metro North Railroad through New York's Freedom of Information Law. The documents cover protests that took place from December 2014 to February 2015 in Grand Central Station in Manhattan where the MTA police have jurisdiction. A number of protests in the timeline occurred there.

The NYPD has not released any documents, but those that have been supplied reveal an information exchange between the NYPD and the MTA police, and the presence of both NYPD as well as MTA undercover officers at the protests.

Police tracked demonstrators as they were moving around Grand Central Station and in the city and identified specific individuals among the

demonstrators. One undercover officer sent frequent email updates on the activities of protesters at the station during a protest on Martin Luther King Day in January. These included notice of the presence of Jose LaSalle, a founder of CopWatch Patrol Unit, in an email that includes his photograph.

Another email chain from December includes a chart of upcoming protests, including one organized by high-school students.

It is worth noting that some of the police spying occurred after Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio called for a halt to the protests against police violence in the aftermath of the shooting death of two NYPD officers in Brooklyn on December 20 by a deranged gunman, although the documents indicate that surveillance of protesters also took place before de Blasio's plea.

The political atmosphere during the first half of December in New York City was one of intensifying anger at police violence, particularly over the Garner case, but also including the dozens of police shootings in the city over the past decade, as well as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and the refusal in November of a grand jury to indict his killer, Officer Darren Wilson.

During the period from December 4 to December 15, large demonstrations against police violence took place throughout the city, some of them partly spontaneous, with tens of thousands of workers and youth protesting in Washington Square Park on December 15.

After the December 20 shooting, however, elements of the state apparatus attempted to go on a counteroffensive. Police union officials claimed that de Blasio had blood on his hands for his supposed tolerance of anti-police-violence protests, and the NYPD staged a near-mutiny when cops turned their backs on de Blasio on several occasions in what

became a political mobilization of the police. Over the next few weeks, NYPD officers then performed a systematic slowdown in arrests and citations for minor crimes across the city.

While police surveillance and intimidation of protesters during this period were undoubtedly intensified, these practices certainly did not begin from scratch. Spying on protesters in New York City who have not broken the law and represent no threat to public safety is the modus operandi of the NYPD and other state agencies, including the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

The NYPD has a long and well-documented history of spying on and harassing Muslims in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. More recently New York cops have video-recorded, photographed, followed and intimidated nonviolent protesters, such as those involved in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan. The NYPD also subjected these protesters to beatings, pepper spraying and the use of LRAD sound cannons. One of the most egregious state attacks on protesters' democratic rights was the frame-up of organizer Cecily MacMillan in 2014.

There can be little doubt that the documents published by the *Intercept* are only the tip of an iceberg of sustained and extensive surveillance of organizers of and participants in protests against police violence, not only in New York City, but throughout the United States.



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