

UK inquiry refuses to investigate police spying on Workers Revolutionary Party

Paul Mitchell
9 August 2016

The Undercover Policing Inquiry (UPI) chaired by Lord Pitchford has rejected an investigation into police spying on the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

The decision confirms that the UPI is a damage limitation exercise, concerned with cleaning up the fall-out from several high-profile court cases rather than conducting an independent investigation of anti-democratic measures against political organisations and individuals.

The UPI would never have been set up if it had not been for investigations by activists targeted by undercover policing, lawyers and a handful of journalists that led to reports in the media emerging in 2010. They revealed that undercover police officers from the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) had infiltrated hundreds of political groups since 1968, using a wide range of deceptive techniques.

These included using the names of dead children, forming long-term relationships and even fathering children to unsuspecting individuals as part of building their cover story, and then suddenly disappearing.

The resulting court cases led to the Metropolitan Police Service admitting abuses of human rights and paying millions in compensation.

The issue of police spying on the WRP resurfaced last week when actor Ricky Tomlinson called on Pitchford to overturn his decision to refuse him “core participant” status in the inquiry. Tomlinson says he and others, known as the “Shrewsbury 24”, were wrongly prosecuted for their activities in the 1972 building workers strike when he was a plasterer and union activist. Tomlinson was given a two-year sentence, Des Warren three years and four others lesser sentences. The strikers were blacklisted by employers and unable to work in the building industry again.

Pitchford refused to designate Tomlinson a “core participant” on the grounds that he has failed to demonstrate that an undercover officer (CHIS) cultivated a relationship with him or the organisations he associated with that resulted in conviction and blacklisting.

In a classic Catch-22, the terms of reference of an inquiry

meant to uncover secretive police operations rules out participation on the basis of suspicion or hearsay or evidence of non-undercover activities—for example, the “use of a plain-clothed police officer as a spotter or observer engaged in surveillance and intelligence.” There is, therefore, no requirement for the police to reveal operations they instigated, only for their victims to prove they took place.

Pitchford also rules inadmissible “complaints made relating to the conviction...that the prosecution was politically motivated, that an ITV programme *Reds Under the Bed*, broadcast on the day the prosecution case concluded, prejudiced a fair trial, and that the catch-all charge of conspiracy to intimidate [levelled against the Shrewsbury pickets] was an inappropriate one.”

Reds Under the Bed was broadcast in 1973, at a time of mass industrial unrest, claiming to show the “influence of militants and Marxists in British politics, industry and trade unions.”

In making his decision, Pitchford singles out for special treatment Tomlinson’s demand that the inquiry investigate the role of undercover policing in political groups and Tomlinson’s declaration that it was “inconceivable that the WRP were not infiltrated by [a] CHIS [Covert Human Intelligence Source].”

Ignoring well-documented information revealed by ex-MI5 agents Peter Wright, David Shayler and others that indicate that the WRP and its predecessor, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International until it broke with Trotskyism in 1986, were targets of long-running undercover police operations, Pitchford accepts as gospel the testimony of another police spy whose claims of WRP violence, by implication, place it outside the pale.

Speaking in a 2002 BBC documentary series, *True Spies*, Special Branch officer Tony Robinson declares that “the Workers Revolutionary Party, which had been supported by Mr Tomlinson, were ‘not reticent in promoting violence in support of their aims’. Those aims included ‘subversion’ of the democratic system of government.”

In a subsequent section he develops the WRP-violence-Tomlinson amalgam, declaring "...Mr Tomlinson was, he accepts, a union activist who spoke at public meetings in support of the Workers Revolutionary Party. He was charged with conspiracy to intimidate in February 1973."

Effectively refuting charges of violence, Pitchford elsewhere in his deliberations refers to the fact that, "There were no arrests or complaints made on the day" of the picketing in Shrewsbury and that it was "Five months later, on 14 February 1973, allegedly at the instigation of the Shrewsbury employers and the Home Office, 24 individuals, including Mr Tomlinson and Mr Des Warren, were arrested on suspicion of unlawful assembly, intimidation, affray and the common law offence of conspiracy to intimidate, in connection with their visit to Shrewsbury."

Tomlinson declared Pitchford's decision "absolutely ludicrous. Why not give us the benefit of the doubt? Why is [it] always in the establishment's favour?" He added that the police "play a game. We have got to find the evidence to give to them to say that a foul has been committed. They have the evidence and they do everything in their power to stop you getting it."

Tomlinson is correct. It is virtually impossible for those suspecting police infiltration to identify exactly who is involved because the police will "Neither Confirm Nor Deny" who the culprits are and refuse freedom of information requests about their activities. Documents deemed to affect national security and the intelligence services are locked up for 30 years or more. As a result nearly all the cases being accepted for core participant status are those that are already in the public domain and only came to light because the names of some undercover operatives were either disclosed by the agents themselves or uncovered by their victims.

Pitchford's remarks show how the Trotskyist movement and the dangers of its revolutionary perspective being adopted by the working class is a vital concern for the ruling class. The case of the Shrewsbury 24 took place against the background of escalating confrontations between the working class and the Conservative government of Edward Heath, which culminated in the 1974 miners' strike. Heath was forced to call a snap election on the basis, "Who runs the country, the government or the unions?" but lost, leading to the return of a minority Labour government, which refused to overturn the sentences.

The SLL/WRP was in the forefront of the struggles in this period, including against the imprisonment of Tomlinson and Warren. Following his release from prison, Warren joined the WRP, which in 1982 published his book "The Key To My Cell", in which he condemned the trade unions leaders as "paid mercenaries" and "traitors" to the working

class, and his abandonment by the Communist Party.

The continuing sensitivity of the Shrewsbury/WRP case is evident in other recent events. Last year Cabinet Office minister Oliver Letwin confirmed the withheld documents would not be released until 2021 at the earliest. In May this year human rights organisation Amnesty International revealed that in 1975, following repeated UK government intervention, it dropped Des Warren as a "prisoner of conscience" without informing him or his solicitors. The pressure came from Labour Home Office minister Alex Lyon. At the time Amnesty secretary-general was Martin Ennals, whose brother David Ennals served alongside Lyon as a Foreign Office minister in Harold Wilson's government. Amnesty's capitulation meant it was "open season" on Warren, who died in 2004 from Parkinson's disease, blamed on the "liquid cosh" of drugs given him in prison. The Criminal Cases Review Commission has still not decided whether to send the Shrewsbury 24 case to the Appeal courts four years after the campaign group submitted its request.

In its submission to the Pitchford Inquiry, the Socialist Equality Party rejected its terms of reference, which means that hardly any political organisations have been designated as core participants—which is "especially peculiar, given that the focus of the inquiry is the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) which was specifically created as part of high-level political operations against the left."

The SEP submission demanded "the immediate release of the names of all undercover police operatives, especially those active in the Workers Revolutionary Party (and its forerunners and successor organisations), their pseudonyms and dates of operation."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact