

Meeting on UK undercover policing highlights need for an independent inquiry

Paul Mitchell
23 February 2017

Last week a number of organisations and individuals involved in the exposure of police surveillance and infiltration of protest groups and political parties held a meeting, “Strikers & Spy cops—from Grunwick to now,” in central London.

During the course of the meeting it became clear, as the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has maintained from the start, that the state is using the ongoing Undercover Policing Inquiry (UPI), chaired by Lord Justice Pitchford, to review and refine its repressive policies. The role of the UPI is to clean 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.

In its submission to the UPI, the SEP rejected its terms of reference, which means that hardly any political organisations have been designated as core participants. This 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.”

The London meeting heard how undercover police officers from the SDS and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) had infiltrated hundreds of political groups since 1968, using a multitude of deceptive techniques. These included using the names of at least 42 dead children, and officers forming long-term relationships with unsuspecting individuals and fathering their children, as part of building their cover story before suddenly disappearing.

The resulting court cases led to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) admitting abuses of human rights and

paying millions in compensation.

The chairperson of last week’s meeting, Eveline Lubbers from the Undercover Research Group, explained that although the UPI was established in 2014 (by then Home Secretary Theresa May) it had still not started its hearings. “It is depressing... Until now we thought the Inquiry was the best thing we could get to get to the truth and find something out,” Lubbers said, before revealing that the MPS had, on the morning of the meeting, asked for a further seven months delay.

The force claims it needs more time to process anonymity orders for the 116 former SDS officers who have been identified to the UPI. In addition, MPS lawyer Melanie Jones asked that Pitchford keep secret those undercover officers that he “wishes to subject to more considered scrutiny.” She brushed aside the criminal actions of the undercover police officers and the trauma perpetrated against their victims, declaring it would be “harrowing and upsetting” for the officers! “Some are in advanced years. Some may need to undergo distressing and confusing psychological or medical assessment, which are themselves costly in financial resources,” Jones added.

If Pitchford grants the request at a hearing planned for early April, the UPI is unlikely to start until 2018—the year it was supposed to complete its findings.

Investigative reporter Solomon Hughes told the audience that in 2006, following a request under the new Freedom of Information legislation, the MPS released a number of Special Branch files reporting in great detail on the 1976-78 Grunwick industrial dispute. At various points in the files are the words “Please index” against an individual or organisation—in other words, create a file on them.

Since 2006 Hughes explained, the MPS has refused similar requests, either saying they have lost the files, declaring those asking for the information “vexatious,” or

that releasing it would “undermine national security” and lead to “more crime and terrorist incidents and place officers at risk.”

Civil rights lawyer Harriet Wistrich, who is acting for several women involved in the “fraudulent” long-term relationships with “men who turned out to be spies,” explained that the refusal of the MPS to release information was a result of the recently developed “Neither Confirm Nor Deny” policy. It now meant “we can’t get hold of anything.” She told the meeting that “over 18 months into the Inquiry...we are nowhere seeing an ounce of disclosure, nowhere near a public hearing.” Wistrich also revealed that MPS officials had shredded documents the previous week that could be relevant to the UPI.

Wistrich explained that the onus is on anyone suspecting the activities of undercover police officers, to prove they have taken place. 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.

Wistrich concluded by saying, “It’s very difficult to see anything coming out of this Inquiry.”

In the Q&A session that followed the speeches, this reporter explained, “What we are seeing is a damage limitation exercise designed to reorganise the state. The implementation of the NCND policy is a sign the state is becoming more repressive. Things must get worse because of Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of nationalism and militarism internationally. The state is gearing up to deal with the dissent and opposition these developments must inevitably produce.”

The reporter then read a section from a leaflet produced by the Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance, which states, “We have no faith in any of the ongoing police inquiries or reports, including Operation Herne, nor those from the satellite bodies such as the Independent Police Complaints Commission or Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary. Several have already been thoroughly discredited.”

This is all well and good, but in the next paragraph, the leaflet then creates illusions in the UPI, declaring it “must be transparent, robust and independent” and that “it should happen without delay.”

“Surely the evidence produced by tonight’s speakers proves that the state cannot be trusted to investigate its own criminality,” the reporter continued before calling for

an inquiry into policing that is truly independent of the state.

He also discussed the experiences of the 1995 independent Workers Inquiry into the killing of Joy Gardner, the first immigrant to die in Britain during a deportation. The International Communist Party, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, initiated the inquiry. Using trial court evidence and testimony supplied by Joy’s family, the inquiry was able to prove that her death was the direct result of the actions of the deportation squad. In addition, her brutal treatment was the result of a concerted offensive by the British government against immigrant workers and democratic rights, which was never opposed by the Labour Party or the trade union bureaucracy.

The call for an independent inquiry found a response from another platform speaker, Marcia Rigg from the United Friends and Families Campaign against deaths in police custody (and whose brother met the same fate), who said a “Peoples’ Court” should be set up. And in concluding the meeting, Lubbers agreed the idea of a real independent inquiry was something to be thought about.

As socialists have long recognised, far from being a neutral arbiter that can be made to operate above class interests, the police are part of the state’s “special bodies of armed men,” assigned the task of keeping the capitalist class in power and the working class oppressed. The police can no more be reformed or made democratically accountable than capitalism itself.

The findings of the Workers Inquiry into the killing of Joy Gardner are contained in the book, A State Murder Exposed: The Truth about the Killing of Joy Gardner. It can be obtained here.



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