UK: Lush workers oppose attempt to gag campaign against police undercover operations

Margot Miller
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UK cosmetic retailer Lush recently held a poster campaign against undercover policing in the face of intimidation of its staff by former police officers, encouraged by the Conservative government's Home Office.

Lush is particularly popular with young people for its aromatic, hand-made cosmetics and hair products, which are not tested on animals. In 2007, it began donating to environmental groups.

In 2011, Zionist groups called for a boycott of its products due to its support for Oneworld's Freedom for Palestine initiative. It has also campaigned for the release of Guantanamo detainee Shaker Aamer to the UK and has backed anti-fracking campaigns. Following the Grenfell fire, Lush stepped in with funding when the Conservative-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council did not provide translations of vital information for the tower's survivors.

The high street chain began its latest campaign in conjunction with Police Spies Out of Lives campaigning support group and the Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance. Posters in its windows featured a male model dressed as both a policeman and activist with the slogan "PAID TO LIE," and fake police tape printed with "POLICE HAVE CROSSED THE LINE." Slogans on the posters included the words, "SPIED ON FOR TAKING A STAND" and #SPYCOPS INQUIRY: TRUTH OR COVERUP."

The campaign aimed to highlight the decades-long infiltration by undercover police into political, environmental and animal rights groups and to express dissatisfaction with the ongoing inquiry into undercover policing. Such was the scale of infiltration by police agents that a number of them entered into relationships with activists and had children with them.

But within a week of beginning the campaign in early June, Lush was forced to pull down its posters in its 104 stores, declaring it needed to protect its staff from harassment. Staff reported ex-officers going into shops and intimidating them into removing the posters. The campaign continued on Lush's website, featuring a long statement, "Exposing the spy who loved me " and inviting visitors to sign a petition.

Criticism of the campaign was led by Conservative Home Secretary Sajid Javid, who claimed it was anti-police and damaging to officers who were not part of the alleged wrongdoing. He condemned it as a "public advertising campaign against our hardworking police." Also attacking Lush was Ché Donald, the vice-chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales. The right-wing media did its utmost to vilify the campaign, with a *Daily Mail* front-page article headlined, "High Street Chain's vile slur on police."

This week, in an interview with the *Guardian*, two of Lush's founders, Mark and Mo Constantine, stated that after the initial poster campaign, which began in 40 stores, shop staff "were followed home ... and attacked on Facebook. The newspaper reported that "One uniformed police officer came to a shop and said they were going to organise an anti-Lush campaign." Outside a shop in Leeds, two police officers on horseback stayed outside the store for a period.

However, such was the favourable response from the public, opposed to censorship in general, and the support of its employees for it, that the window campaign was relaunched. In a Lush branch in London and in other areas, including Northampton, staff held discussions and took votes to continue the campaign.

The following week, a new campaign poster was displayed in all its shops. This time there was no photograph but text pinpointing how undercover police spied on 1,000 political groups while "infiltrating the lives, homes and beds of citizens for 50 years." It criticised the inquiry for being "increasingly secret and going nowhere."

Police surveillance and infiltration of political and campaigning groups began in earnest in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of intense class struggle internationally, initially against anti-Vietnam War and anti-apartheid groups.

In 2011, at the instigation of eight litigants, a police investigation called Operation Herne was set up into the activities of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), which operated in London between 1968 and 2008. The outcome was an apology and compensation of £425,000 paid to one woman who had been duped into having a relationship with Special Branch detective Bob Lambert and had his child, while he was

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working as an undercover cop.

More women reported that partners, with whom they had long-term relationships and even children, had in fact lied about who they really were—police spies. When confronted, some of the men confessed. Environmental activist Mark Stone confessed his real identity as Police Constable Mark Kennedy. An unknown number simply disappeared, after having informed for years on those closest to them.

In the words of Carolyn, a Police Spies Out of Lives campaigner, "You don't have to do very much to end up on a police file, and potentially be labelled a domestic extremist."

The police spies embedded themselves into the lives of their hapless victims, working undercover for five years on average. They harvested information from grieving families campaigning for justice after the death of relatives in police custody, for example. This included the family of murdered teenager Stephen Lawrence.

One of the victims, known only as Andrea, expressed the extreme hurt and trauma suffered by what was nothing less than "state sponsored abuse." She had been deceived in a five-year relationship with police officer Mark Jenner. Not only did the officers steal and adopt the identities of dead children, but they stole the lives of their partners, who had assumed they were in a genuine relationship.

The evidence gathered from the work of the spies was used to form a blacklist to deprive socialists or militant workers of a living. The Metropolitan Police Service admitted they provided names from the blacklist to the major construction companies. In 2016, construction leader Sir Robert McAlpine paid out £75 million to 771 blacklisted building workers.

Unable to keep a lid on the scandal, in 2015 then Home Secretary Theresa May launched an inquiry into the activities of the SDS and also the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), which operated between 1999 to 2010.

Last year, the inquiry revealed that 1,000 organisations had been infiltrated and spied on. Their names, however, were withheld but the Pabloite International Marxist Group was one of the few groups identified. The inquiry has since released some of the cover names of spies and the organisations they infiltrated, including the Socialist Labour League and Workers Revolutionary Party—the predecessor organisations of the Socialist Equality Party (UK).

Like so many other inquiries—including the Aberfan and Hillsborough disasters, and the ongoing inquiry into the Grenfell fire—the purpose is to conceal the truth and protect the guilty.

After three years and at a cost of £10 million to date, the inquiry is still in the evidence gathering stage and not a single piece of substantive evidence has been heard in public due to police legal applications for anonymity. Hearings to examine evidence will not begin until next year and the inquiry, due to end this year, is not expected to conclude until 2018.

While the inquiry has identified, though not named, 171 members of the SDS and 84 members of the NPOIU, it is likely that Judge Sir John Mitting, chair of the inquiry, will receive their submissions in private.

Core participants have written to both previous home secretary Amber Rudd and Savid Javid conveying their concerns about the inquiry but have received no reply. In March, 60 campaigners expressed no confidence in the inquiry by walking out. Judge Mitting conceded their demand for a panel to join him but refused their other demands. They are calling for the inquiry to investigate operations in Scotland and abroad, and full disclosure of police files on individuals and all environmental and political groups as well as the undercover names of the spies. Without the latter it is impossible for all the victims to identify themselves or give evidence, and a cover-up is inevitable.

The attempt to silence the Lush campaign is of a piece with the evisceration of democratic rights in Britain by the government, police and intelligence agencies—epitomised most cruelly in the politically motivated incarceration of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy in London these last six years.

The attempts to silence Lush take place as Google and other Internet conglomerates, backed by government of all political stripes, step up their censorship of anti-war, left-wing and socialist websites. Among their main targets is the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Noting the moves of governments to censor any dissenting voices, Lush states on its website, "Across the globe, governments are instructing Internet service providers to restrict Internet access, particularly to social media."

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