

UK: Left groups targeted for decades-long police infiltration

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A database compiled by the *Guardian* and the Undercover Research Group, activists that scrutinise police espionage, has shed light on the extent of state spying on political groups between 1968 and 2011.

Over 1,000 political groups were targeted by undercover police agents, with the overwhelming majority left-wing organisations.

According to the new database, it is known that covert police agents spied on at least 22 left-wing/socialist groups, 10 environmental groups, 9 anti-racist campaigns and 9 anarchist groups, as well as 17 justice campaign groups. This is in addition to several trade unions and to campaigns against apartheid, war, the arms trade, nuclear weapons and the monarchy.

By contrast, only three far right-groups were targeted—the British National Party, Combat 18 and United British Alliance, involving only five agents in total.

According to the information obtained, the Socialists Workers Party (SWP), known as the International Socialists until 1977, was the primary known victim of police spying. Twenty-four undercover agents were deployed by police to infiltrate the party between 1970 and 2007. Undercover officers were in the organisation almost continuously during this 37-year period, often with more than one officer embedded at a given time.

Four of the 24 officers who infiltrated the SWP deceived women into forming sexual relationships with them, before abandoning them once their spying operations were complete. One spy, whose name has not been released, married an unsuspecting female party member and fathered a child with her as part of his efforts to build his cover story. The emotional suffering inflicted can only be imagined.

The database was compiled using a variety of sources, as the Undercover Policing Inquiry (UPI)—set

up in 2015 supposedly with the aim of investigating police spying between 1968 and 2011—has refused to release full details of those involved.

As well as the minimal official list, the database draws on information garnered from the Undercover Research Group's own investigations and from whistle-blowers, including Peter Francis, a former undercover officer and UPI core participant.

Due to the dearth of information supplied by the UPI, the database lists only 124 of the 1,000 groups spied on by the police since 1968. It includes information only about groups targeted by spies from the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), the two Special Branch units responsible for carrying out much of the police infiltration. The SDS was active between 1968 and 2008, and the NPOIU between 1999 and 2011.

Many police spies worked within left-wing organisations for five years or more, with one infiltrator, using the name Dave Evans, working within the SWP for seven years. Another SWP infiltrator in the 1980s, Alan Bond, stole the name of a dead child for his fake identity.

The new data shows that other organisations infiltrated included the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), an anti-war popular front organisation established in 1966 and largely dominated by the Pabloite International Marxist Group (IMG). The VSC was penetrated by nine covert officers between 1968 and 1972.

This is only the tip of an iceberg. Information revealed by ex-MI5 agents Peter Wright and David Shayler, among others, indicates that the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)—until 1986 the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—and its predecessor, the Socialist Labour

League (SLL), were the main targets of undercover police operations from the late 1960s onwards.

The database gave information about only two of the police spies infiltrating the WRP, cover names “Michael Scott” and “Peter Collins,” who penetrated the group in 1971-1976 and 1973-1977. But in a House of Lords debate on combating the influence of “subversive and extremist elements in our society” in January 1975, Lord Chalfont singled out the WRP, declaring it to be one of the “most important revolutionary group[s].”

The Earl of Kimberley warned that the WRP “must not be dismissed as just another fringe movement. It is by far the most dangerous of the Trotskyist organisations in this country. It is larger, better organised, and, from the point of view of industrial agitation, more intelligently led than its rivals.”

This extensive infiltration, carried out over multiple decades, is a fundamental attack on democratic rights. The Socialist Equality Party demands that all details of the spying operations be fully and immediately disclosed.

In 2015, the SEP sent a letter to the UPI demanding “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.”

Lord Pitchford, the chair of the Undercover Policing Inquiry at the time, refused to investigate police surveillance of the SLL and WRP, despite the evidence from ex-MI5 agents and others. This only confirmed the UPI’s essential role as a police cover-up and exercise in damage limitation. The inquiry was only convoked after activists and journalists uncovered damaging evidence of state surveillance and legal challenges had been launched for compensation. Unable to keep a lid on the scandal, then-Home Secretary Theresa May launched the inquiry in 2015.

Since then, nearly 200 victims have been named as core participants, though the true numbers affected likely run into the thousands.

From the outset, the inquiry did not require the police to reveal their operations and accepted as participants only some of those who already knew themselves to be victims. The SDS alone employed 201 people over its 40 years of existence.

Three years later, and at a cost of nearly £12 million, the inquiry is still in the evidence-gathering stage. No single piece of substantive evidence has been heard in public due to police legal applications for anonymity. Instead, anonymous police officers will give private evidence to a judge, who will produce a final report in 2023 at the earliest.

Other organisations, including MI5’s F-Branch, are known to have undertaken extensive “counter-subversion” spying operations. F-Branch, which was active until 1988, particularly targeted the Trotskyist movement, focusing particular attention on the SLL/WRP. A section of F-Branch, F6, dealt with Trotskyist and radical organisations, while another section, F7, specifically monitored the Workers Revolutionary Party and SWP.

The former head of MI5, Stella Rimmington, director general from 1992 to 1996, admitted in 2017 that spying on the Trotskyist movement was a central part of its operations: “I now see in [pro-Jeremy Corbyn] Momentum some of the people we were looking at in the Trotskyist organisation of the 1980s, now grown up and advising our would-be prime minister Mr. Corbyn on how to prepare himself for power...their names are familiar, shall we say that much?”

Even though it has been revealed to be one of the most prominent victims of police infiltration, the pseudo-left SWP has produced one 201-word article on the revelations. The SWP’s response was to declare that the figures are “further proof that the British state is not neutral” and that “The best response is to keep up the fight against the system the spymasters defend.” In opposition to such an unserious response, workers and young people must recognise the vast extent of police spying as a serious and still-present threat.



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