

Mercenary group sued for hiring armed poll watchers for election day in Minnesota

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25 October 2020

According to a lawsuit filed October 20 by the Council on American-Islamic Relations of Minnesota (CAIR-Minnesota), former US military Special Operations soldiers are being recruited to watch polling places in the battleground state of Minnesota. The recruitment is being organized by a private mercenary group, Atlas Aegis. The lawsuit asserts that Atlas Aegis is violating the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In the lawsuit, CAIR-Minnesota and the League of Women Voters of Minnesota contend that the “defendants’ intentional recruitment of armed, highly trained, and elite former military personnel in the context of ‘protecting’ the polls serves no purpose other than to intimidate voters.”

Atlas Aegis posted a job listing earlier this month that sought former Special Operations personnel to staff “security positions in Minnesota during the November Election and beyond to protect election polls.”

The groups that are suing the company want a federal judge in Minnesota to stop Atlas Aegis from any further recruitment and to ban armed “poll watchers” on Election Day. The complaint references “an unnamed ‘consortium’ of individuals and businesses.” Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison told the *Washington Post* that he requested Atlas Aegis “cease and desist” from any plans to patrol polling stations on Election Day. Last week, Ellison claimed the company had rescinded its plans and will not provide any security on election day, though it is not clear if this is really the case.

Critical questions remain unanswered. Who were the other “individuals and businesses” that were allegedly involved? What role, if any, is played by the Trump campaign in Minnesota?

The lawsuit notes that the “threat [of violence] is terrifyingly credible given the concrete steps [Atlas Aegis and its executives] have already taken to recruit those armed personnel, particularly considering the context of broader intimidation efforts targeting voters and activists in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States.”

Atlas Aegis is based in Franklin, Tennessee and was

formed in August of 2019. It advertises on its website that it provides “a level of security rarely seen outside of US Special Operations.”

The advertisement specifically solicits “Tier 1 and Tier 2 SOF personnel only.” “SOF” stands for Special Operation Forces personnel, and “Tier 1 and Tier 2” are classifications for elite forces in Iraq and Afghanistan that conducted kill-and-capture missions. An immediate question arises: Why were former assassination squad soldiers specifically solicited? Were these armed groups preparing to inflict mass violence on voters and/or protesters?

The lawsuit points to troubling connections and figures among the fascist right. Atlas Aegis Chairman Anthony Caudle told the *Washington Post* earlier this month that his company is hiring soldiers specifically to “make sure the antifas don’t try to destroy the election site” and to guard against protesters associated with Black Lives Matter.

The lawsuit quotes Atlas’s executive vice president, Dr. D. Gregory Wark, as saying with regards to churches, “We need to make our buildings of worship look inviting to those who need to be there but also menacing to those who seek to do harm. Armed uniformed security personnel will always look menacing...” The lawsuit explains the defendants’ goal: “deploying armed agents will present a menacing obstacle to voters seeking access to the polls.”

Wark is a military-styled pastor who posts on social media about his support for the US embassy move to Jerusalem. Michael Beltran, chief operating officer of Atlas Aegis, was on the cover of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, a far-right publication popular with mercenaries and military forces. He is pictured in tactical military gear and an assault rifle in an article titled, “An American Goliath in Afghanistan.”

Right-wing vigilantes have attacked protests under the protection of police. Earlier this year, President Trump urged his supporters to “liberate” Minnesota and other states that implemented lockdown measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

A number of corporate executives and groups were involved in opposing the state’s lockdown earlier this year,

and questions arise as to whether they are involved in the “consortium” of businesses working with Atlas Aegis.

For example, the campaign to “reopen Minnesota” was backed by powerful conservative business interests including Marty Davis, CEO of Cambria, which manufactures quartz countertops. Marty Davis and his brother Mitch are heirs to a \$1.7 billion family fortune and are on *Forbes* magazine’s list of the richest American families.

Davis has publicly stated his role in working with the Trump administration to force Democratic Governor Tim Walz to reopen the state after far-right protesters gathered outside the governor’s home following the president’s “LIBERATE MINNESOTA” tweet on April 17. Davis says that on April 18 he facilitated a call between Walz and Trump that led to a relaxation of restrictions on businesses and gatherings in the state.

A \$200,000-per-couple fundraiser for the Trump campaign was held at the Lake Minnetonka home of Marty Davis the day after the first presidential debate. Though Davis is not named in the lawsuit and there is no proof that he was himself involved with Atlas Aegis, the lawsuit’s reference to “a consortium of individuals and businesses” raises the question: to what extent are powerful business groups supporting the president’s plans to carry forward an electoral coup and thus reopen businesses? Which businesses are possibly involved?

Many questions surround the role of the group Minnesota Gun Rights, founded by brothers Chris and Aaron Dorr, far-right activists on the right wing of the Republican Party. According to publicly available tax documents, they have raised more than \$2.9 million for their causes since 2013. They used their online profiles to call for anti-quarantine protests in Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Iowa and New York.

Jaylani Hussein, executive director of CAIR-Minnesota, told *Sojourners Magazine* that Atlas Aegis chose Minnesota because of its large Muslim population, saying, “Islamophobia is a clear reason why Minnesota is a target. We know from our history that anti-Muslim networks across the country have focused on Minnesota as the frontline battleground of what they call the Islamic takeover of America.”

Similar plots may be underway in other battleground states.

Local officials in neighboring Wisconsin are already planning for militias and armed groups to show up at polling places to intimidate voters. Dane County Sheriff Dave Mahoney told local 27 News that his police have been informed by “national training expos and meetings with law enforcement groups” to prepare for election day.

“We’re being told there’s a good chance there will be militia groups all across the country that are now empowered to protect the vote and that’s not their responsibility,” said Mahoney.

Under Wisconsin law, firearms are not banned at polling stations, but threats and intimidation are. In a press release, Attorney General Josh Kaul warned, “Voter intimidation is illegal. If someone breaks the laws that protect against voter intimidation, they should be prepared to spend time behind bars.”

In Florida, armed security guards were seen outside of a polling place in St. Petersburg. The Trump campaign denied hiring the two guards who were near a Pinellas County early voting location. However, Pinellas County Supervisor of Elections Julie Marcus told local news WFLA 8, “the persons that were dressed in these security uniforms had indicated to sheriff’s deputies that they belonged to a licensed security company and they indicated—and this has not been confirmed yet—that they were hired by the Trump campaign.”

Sheriff Bob Gualteri held a news conference downplaying the event, in which he stated that the two armed guards did not violate any laws, saying, “Their mere presence does not constitute voter coercion or intimidation.”

Vice News confirmed that as part of the Trump campaign’s efforts to sabotage the election and the counting of ballots, members of a far-right Trump group boasted online about securing positions at polling stations and advocating violence.

The Democratic Party has said almost nothing about the efforts of the Trump regime to engineer an electoral coup on November 3. The danger of far-right militias dictating political life will continue and intensify no matter which party wins on Election Day. The working class must be warned of the immense dangers that lie ahead and prepare an independent response.



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