

UK's Undercover Policing Inquiry downplays state surveillance of Workers Revolutionary Party

Thomas Scripps
25 May 2021

The Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI) has provided a carefully managed account of state infiltration in the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

Until 1986, the WRP was the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The section was expelled by the ICFI for its betrayal of Trotskyist principles and a new British section—today's Socialist Equality Party—established from the faction which supported the ICFI.

As the most prominent section of the international Trotskyist movement up to the mid-1980s, and with significant standing in British politics, the WRP was of serious interest to the British police and intelligence services.

The UCPI is a damage limitation exercise by the British state, established in 2015 after the exposure of widespread use of undercover police agents against political organisations. Between 1968 and 2011, over 1,000 political groups were targeted by the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), part of the police's Special Branch, and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit—a private organisation funded by the Home Office. The Metropolitan Police disbanded the SDS in 2008.

Evidence published by the UCPI relating to the WRP covers the years 1973 to 1976. The party is mentioned in the SDS annual reviews of 1973, 1974 and 1975. Reports from two undercover police officers operating within the WRP cover the period January 1974 to December 1976.

The Socialist Labour League (forerunner organisation to the WRP) is mentioned in the annual review of 1972 and is the subject of two specific reports from undercover officers—one from February 1971 and another from April 1973.

Neither of the police officers who it is admitted infiltrated the WRP have been named. They are referred to only by their inquiry codes HN303 and HN298 and by the aliases they adopted while undercover, Peter Collins and Michael Scott.

Information provided by the two police spies gave the SDS access to lists of attendees at private WRP meetings, internal party documents, factional disagreements and splits, party security protocols, plans for upcoming public events and campaigns, figures for sales of the WRP's newspaper and money raised in fundraising drives, and personal details about the lives of party members. The officers reported on branch meetings in Hackney and Stoke Newington, sub-district meetings in North London, East London and East Ham, London aggregate meetings and several national conferences.

Extensive details were provided in a 23-page report of the special delegates conference in July 1974 which debated the WRP's constitution, including of the “stringent security measures” to safeguard the event, the content of the speeches given, the progress of financial campaigns and an estimate of the size of the party's membership and of possible splits within the leadership. The officer provided copies of proposed

amendments to the constitution.

A similarly thorough 18-page account was given of the first party conference in January 1975, again recounting the “conditions of extraordinary security” under which the event was held, the course of the debate and votes, and any indications of “bad blood” between leading members.

In shorter memos, “Collins” and “Scott” relayed information about the WRP's campaign in defence of the “Shrewsbury Two”—victimised construction workers Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson—and efforts to organise builders' action committees, the party's work through the All Trades Union Alliance, its presence among British Leyland workers and work to win supporters among the Labour Party Young Socialists.

Three of the published documents inform the SDS of the composition of the WRP's leadership.

The officers also reported on the marriage arrangements of a branch secretary, the pregnancy of the national organiser of the WRP Young Socialists and members' employment details. Heavily redacted documents precisely track the movements, employment and car ownership of a particular individual (or individuals) who was (or were) the subject of separate Special Branch investigations not released.

According to the record presented by the UCPI, the sustained police interest in the WRP then came to an abrupt halt in the mid-1970s. This account is entirely implausible and internally self-contradictory.

In the 1975 SDS annual report, the section on the WRP concludes, “Since their potential for public disorder appears to have diminished, SDS coverage for this organisation will now be withdrawn.” But the Inquiry has published five reports submitted by undercover officers in 1976, and one in 1982. These include a report showing internal knowledge of the WRP's plan to reorganise its press and another on the suspension of a Central Committee member.

The report submitted March 11, 1976 underscores how absurd is the idea that the state lost interest in the WRP after 1975. It relates to a party training course undertaken by the undercover officer at the White Meadows WRP College of Marxist education in Parwich, Derbyshire. Just a few months before, in September 1975, the Parwich centre had been raided by Special Branch on the pretext of a defamatory article published in the *Observer*.

The *True Spies* documentary, broadcast by the BBC in November 2002, implicated Special Branch in framing the WRP for the raid using an undercover agent. One element of the operation was the placing of nine 22-cal bullets to be “discovered” in a stairwell.

The raid followed a debate in the House of Lords on February 26 on the threat of “subversion and extremism”, held amid rising social and industrial unrest. It was introduced by Lord Chalfont who described the WRP as one of the “most important revolutionary groups[s]”.

The Earl of Kimberley stated in the debate that the WRP was “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.”

The SDS’s own annual reports indicate similar concerns. The 1972 summary notes that the then Socialist Labour League is “gaining support for its indoor meetings.” The 1973 summary refers to the party “going all out with their recruitment campaign” and to “real progress” being made by the WRP in the trade unions, which “does not bode well for future industrial harmony.” The 1974 summary describes the WRP as being “heartened by its recruitment campaign... and by its growing financial support”, adding that the party is “likely to be in the van of industrial unrest”.

No account is given in the 1975 report of why the WRP’s potential for, in the police’s words, “public disorder” was suddenly considered to be “diminished”. It simply notes that the party has “continued its support for the release of the ‘Shrewsbury Two’” and “held several indoor meetings and outside demonstrations protesting against the raid and demanding a full enquiry”, which gained “little practical support from other revolutionaries”.

Bizarrely, again with no additional explanation, the report also claims that one of the SDS officers in the WRP, “Peter Collins”, “has penetrated the National Front, at the instigation of a leading member of the Workers Revolutionary Party with whom he is particularly friendly”.

The proceedings of the UCPI investigation clarified none of these questions. “Peter Collins” was not called to testify on grounds of ill health. “Michael Scott” suffered a prolonged bout of amnesia, repeatedly claiming “I can’t recall” when asked about his undercover activities in the WRP or suggesting reports could have been the work of the conveniently absent “Collins”.

Steps were taken to ensure no difficult subjects or questions could be raised. No one from the WRP was afforded core participant status and given the opportunity to participate in the UCPI. The Socialist Equality Party applied for core participant status, but was rejected on the spurious grounds that it had not been directly targeted. In fact, by penetrating the WRP, the SDS was infiltrating the ICFI, of which the SEP is now the official representative in Britain.

What has been carried out under the guise of an inquiry is a cover-up. Having been forced to release certain documents, the state has ensured the UCPI obscures the full extent of its surveillance of the SLL/WRP.

There is no rational reason to believe that only two agents were operating within the party, let alone that all undercover work ceased in the mid-1970s. That the UCPI keeps this hidden signifies either that there were too many agents to publicly admit to, or that they were of such a high level that the state will not compromise them in any way.

Special Branch works mostly for the security services, especially MI5 which also carries out its own operations against left-wing political organisations. Under British law, MI5 officers cannot lay hands on members of the public and generally relies on Special Branch to carry out arrests, interrogations and in preparing cases for prosecution. Special Branch most notably assists in MI5 spying operations.

Referring to the undercover report on White Meadows, Counsel to the Inquiry David Barr QC acknowledged, “there is also a document which suggests that the intelligence was passed on to the Security Service, who were ‘appreciative’ of the White Meadows operation.”

Proof from the UCPI that MI5 had an interest in SDS operations in the WRP adds to previous claims by multiple sources that the party was targeted by intelligence operatives.

In 1987, former MI5 agent Peter Wright published his memoirs, *Spycatcher*, which revealed “the far and wide left” was one of the agency’s priorities in the 1970s—the WRP is specifically named.

In 1990, then Labour MP Ken Livingstone claimed in a public meeting

of the Marxist Party, set up by former WRP leader Gerry Healy, that high level MI5 agents had infiltrated and been tasked with breaking up the WRP. Livingstone confirmed the allegation in a letter to the ICFI, but rebuffed its demand to reveal his sources and provide the proof.

In 2000, another former MI5 agent, David Shayler, alleged in a sworn statement that the Security Service received reports from a high-level spy in the WRP (then the SLL) in the late 1960s.

The truth behind the cryptic statements, redacted reports and scraps of anecdote must be uncovered. State infiltration is a life-or-death question for the revolutionary movement and must be guarded against and exposed by the working class.

In 1975, the year Special Branch claims it lost interest in state surveillance of the WRP, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the first systematic investigation by the Trotskyist movement into the assassination of Leon Trotsky by a Stalinist agent in Mexico, August 1940.

Security and the Fourth International not only revealed the circumstances surrounding the brutal murder of the great Marxist theoretician of world socialist revolution. It led to the exposure of the network of GPU and American intelligence agents within the Fourth International that ensured the success of Stalin’s conspiracy against Trotsky’s life. It also laid the basis for exposing continued state operations against the Trotskyist movement in the United States and other countries. Numerous other examples of the work of state agents targeting left tendencies and the Irish republican movement in the UK and elsewhere were also documented.

This proceeded in the face of bitter opposition by Pabloite and pseudo-left organizations, which denounced the exposure of spies placed inside the Trotskyist movement as “agent-baiting.” The Undercover Police Inquiry is further proof of the dangerous and politically criminal character of all such attempts to downplay the question of securing against state surveillance, infiltration and provocation.

The Socialist Equality Party condemns the operations against the SLL/WRP revealed by the UCPI and refuses to accept its potted account as the full story. We demand the immediate release of information on all operations carried out against the SLL/WRP, the SEP and other political organisations, by all the state agencies involved.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)