

New York federal judge orders “compassionate release” of 3 of the Newburgh Four convicted in FBI entrapment scheme

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Three victims of a notorious Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)-orchestrated entrapment scheme targeting Muslims have been given compassionate release from prison on the orders of Judge Colleen McMahon of the United States District Court in Manhattan after more than a decade in prison.

The three—Onta Williams, Laguerre Payen and David Williams (no relation to Onta)—were convicted in 2010 of participating in what Judge McMahon termed “an F.B.I.-orchestrated conspiracy.” The fourth frame-up victim, James Cromitie, remains in prison.

McMahon, who originally sentenced the four in 2011 to a minimum of 25 years imprisonment, expressed reservations at the time about the government’s case, remarking, “The government did not have to infiltrate and foil some nefarious plot—there was no nefarious plot to foil.” Cromitie, Onta Williams and David Williams’s guilty verdict was upheld by a federal appeals court in 2014.

The alleged terrorist plot of which the men had been convicted, supposedly consisting of plans to blow up synagogues in New York City and use stinger missiles to shoot down military aircraft at Stewart International Airport in Newburgh, New York, was entirely the creation of the FBI. A longtime agency informant, Shahad Hussain, initially lured Cromitie with the promise of as much as \$250,000 and the chance to participate in a jihadist mission. Cromitie’s task was to recruit other individuals into a bogus conspiracy to carry out the phony attacks.

The three individuals whom Cromitie ultimately ensnared had no political motivations but were in fact simply impoverished Newburgh residents, converts to Islam and members of a local mosque, who were lured

with the promise of jobs, money, cars, cell phones and computers. The “bombs” and “missiles” supplied by the FBI were fakes. It reportedly took nearly a year for Cromitie, who had recently joined the mosque, to convince the three to participate in this government-fabricated “conspiracy.” It was revealed during the original trial that other members of the mosque were suspicious of Cromitie and urged that congregants distance themselves from him.

It became clear during the trial of the Newburgh Four that Hussain was a longtime government asset. He had previously been sent by the FBI to infiltrate and spy on members of other mosques in upstate New York. He is reportedly now living safely in Pakistan.

During the original trial, it was revealed that Hussain had an extremely shady past, including an arrest for murder in Pakistan. Hussain admitted entering the US on a fake British passport and had fraud convictions for a driving license scam. He became an FBI informant in exchange for help with those charges. Much of the evidence presented during the trial at which the four were convicted was based on the testimony of this admitted liar.

Subsequent to the trial of the Newburgh Four, in 2018, Hussain was responsible for the deaths of 20 partygoers who were killed in an accident involving a defective vehicle rented from a company he owned.

The Newburgh Four “conspirators” were arrested in the Bronx by New York City police in a highly stage-managed, “made for TV” sting operation as they were planting the phony bombs at a synagogue in the Bronx.

The bourgeois political and media establishment was deployed in a propaganda storm to paint this and other FBI-made Islamic terrorist plots as part of a vast

conspiracy, seeking to terrorize the population into accepting increased police-state measures and supporting US imperialist wars in the Middle East.

At the time of the Newburgh Four trial, Preet Bharara, the United States attorney in Manhattan, who had been nominated by President Barack Obama and confirmed unanimously by the US Senate in 2009, said: “Homegrown terrorism is a serious threat, and today’s convictions affirm our commitment to do everything we can to protect against it.”

A defense campaign for the four led by family members as well as civil rights organizations and members of the New York’s Islamic community brought the facts to public attention in the face of this onslaught. A forum sponsored by the National Lawyers Guild and the American Civil Liberties Union at New York University in March 2010 highlighted the government persecution of Muslims, and connected it to the widespread practice of police entrapment.

At the forum, Alicia McWilliams, the aunt of David Williams, said, “They must pick the most vulnerable county in the state where there’s no jobs, where there’s no training. [Newburgh] is where the unskilled live. You can’t tell me these individuals masterminded anything. Since the Patriot Act came out, we are targets, communities are targets. Nobody from the FBI interviewed David Williams’s family. Why is that? Because they had their own script.”

The frame-up of the Newburgh Four was a part of a whole series of “terrorist” entrapment cases by the FBI that included Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui in 2015, the Fort Dix Five in New Jersey in 2008 and Yassin Aref and Mohammed Hossein in Albany in 2004. In the Albany case, the FBI used the same informant, Shahad Hussain, as in the case of the Newburgh Five.

These entrapment cases occurred during a period in the aftermath of the passing of the antidemocratic Patriot Act in October 2001, on the heels of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The supposed anti-terrorist initiatives of the state were accompanied by a vast increase in the illegal surveillance of Muslim communities not only by the FBI, but also by the New York Police Department (NYPD).

The NYPD only disbanded in 2014 its notorious Demographics Unit, which sent undercover officers to

locations in the whole New York metropolitan area to spy and harass business-owners and mosque congregants. The full scope of these police-state activities were brought to light in a suit against the NYPD, which put toothless restrictions on the surveillance by the police in a 2017 settlement.

The case was made into a documentary film in 2014, *The Newburgh Sting*. The review of the film by the WSWS concludes, “Despite these shortcomings the documentary still stands out for revealing how media hysteria and government operations work hand-in-glove to attack democratic rights. The logic of the exposure also shows a connection between economic inequality and the attack on democratic rights, possibly more than the filmmakers intended.”

This and other such examples of government-manufactured terrorist conspiracies are testimony to the fact that the agencies of the ruling class will resort to any measures, no matter how despicable, to create an atmosphere in which the imposition of increasingly direct methods of repression against the working class, at home and abroad, can be justified.



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