

Government files reveal official campaign of spying against Occupy Wall Street

By Matthew MacEgan
27 May 2014

A group of lawyers recently released over 4,000 pages of government communications obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that reveal the extent to which law enforcement and intelligence officers went to surveil the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and 2012. A network of “fusion centers,” organized by counterterrorism offices, coordinated mass surveillance on Occupy groups all over the United States. These activities illustrated the fear within the ruling establishment that the protest campaign could ignite a social explosion.

A selection of the communications documents, available online, shows that local law enforcement agencies were required to share information with their colleagues across the country, providing details on everything from “tactics and strategies” used by the protesters to efficient ways of suppressing the movement. They were instructed to submit all such information through the fusion center network every Monday.

Some of the tactics and strategies to watch out for, according to a newsletter created by counterterrorism agencies labeled “LAW ENFORCEMENT ONLY,” include “sit-ins” with members of Congress to discuss political issues, attempts to obtain city ordinances for the establishment of “free-speech zones,” and “rowdy” protests outside vacation resorts. Local police officers were encouraged to respond to these “tactics” with arrests and evictions from public places.

Other “significant” activities closely monitored by law enforcement officials in the name of national security included food drives, yoga classes, and spirituality forums.

The same newsletter gave examples of behavior that could potentially jeopardize the safety of police officers. These included the setting of fires and the

throwing of parking cones into a street in Denver, and the discovery of “Punji” (sharpened) sticks near an Occupy site in San Francisco.

Some of the emails included in the released communications documents include military intelligence information coming from the Pentagon, instructing local officers on how to keep “intel tabs” and how to recognize “gang signs.” Also included in the Pentagon material was a document entitled, “A Legal Guide to Dispelling the Myths of Use of Force,” providing legal justification for the use of deadly force in potential encounters with Occupy protesters.

In addition to all of this information, local law enforcement agencies were instructed to monitor Facebook and Twitter posts by regularly refreshing Google searches, implying that public resources and funds should be expended on sustained surveillance of the protesters and their movements at regular intervals.

The US government currently maintains 78 of these fusion centers, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in funds from the Department of Homeland Security, state governments and other federal agencies. The fusion centers were initially created following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack to share information about potential national security threats. Today they are widely used, including by police and fire departments, with a focus on “routine” criminal activity.

Although Homeland Security officials openly acknowledged that Occupy Wall Street was “mostly peaceful,” this did not stop several levels of government officials from devoting huge resources to surveillance and repression.

Peter Swire, a law and ethics professor at Georgia Tech who served on President Barack Obama’s Review Group on Intelligence and Communications

Technologies, told reporters that this is simply a byproduct of the war on terror. He stated that privacy guidelines that would have restricted such monitoring in the past have slackened. According to Swire, minor offenses like trespassing “can be enough to trigger surveillance of political groups.”

Marsha Catron, a spokesperson for Homeland Security, explained that the fusion centers receiving funds from the DHS are required to follow identical guidelines regarding privacy and civil liberties. Accordingly, the collection of information “solely for the monitoring of activities protected by the US Constitution” is forbidden. These protections, we can assume, include freedom of speech and assembly, two of the “tactics” most frequently exercised by the Occupy protesters.

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