

Police agent-provocateurs exposed at Montreal anti-austerity demonstration

By Carl Bronski
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Further information has come to light concerning the Montreal Police Department's use of agent-provocateurs disguised as "Black Bloc" protestors at a December 18 demonstration against police violence and the anti-austerity policies of the Quebec Liberal government.

Initially the police refused to admit that they had infiltrated the protest. But now they are strongly defending the actions of an undercover cop who drew his revolver and threatened protesters who had "outed" him as a police agent provocateur.

On the night in question about 100 people, most of them students, had gathered for a protest. As the march proceeded through the streets of downtown Montreal, fireworks were shot towards police lines from amongst the ranks of the protestors. Police then unleashed tear gas and flash-bang grenades against the demonstrators.

Near the end of the confrontation, university student Katie Nelson, who reported that the demonstration had gone "strangely violent right away," noticed four men in black clothing and face masks who appeared to be members of the "Black Bloc" anarchist formation. But when one man removed his mask, Nelson immediately identified him as an undercover police officer who had arrested her at a previous demonstration. Having seen that Nelson had recognized him, the undercover cop quickly put his mask back over his face, then whispered something to a fellow undercover officer.

Shortly thereafter, a brief melee ensued. Two undercover officers arrested a protestor who had also questioned their identity, shoving his face into the ground. A member of the press who moved to record the incident was then manhandled. Nelson, who was leaving the scene, was violently struck from behind by one of the men she had identified as a provocateur. She was taken from the scene by ambulance and

hospitalized with a serious neck injury and possible concussion.

In the midst of all this, several demonstrators converged on three of the undercover policemen to demand that they identify themselves and who they work for. One of the officers then pulled a gun on the protestors. When questioned days later by the press about this particular incident, Montreal police spokesman Ian Lafrenière vehemently defended the undercover cop's actions, claiming that he had feared for his life. According to Lafrenière, the undercover cops, "cried, 'Police, back off!' It didn't work, so one of them took out his gun, and at that point, the protestors fled."

Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre and Quebec Public Security Minister Pierre Moreau have refused all comment on the police's actions at the December 18 demonstration. Their silence implies support—support for the police practice of infiltrating demonstrations and inciting violence and for the intimidation of protestors with a lethal weapon.

This is not the first time that the police have used agent-provocateurs to justify the adoption of repressive measures aimed at limiting, if not abolishing for all practical purposes, the democratic right to demonstrate in opposition to government policy.

In documents released in 2011 as part of a plea deal between 17 social activists and Crown attorneys, it was revealed that 12 undercover police agents either spied on or infiltrated protest groups who were planning to participate in demonstrations against world leaders at the June 2010 G-20 summit meeting in Toronto. At least two of these undercover officers played central roles in organizing protest activities of various anarchist collectives. This included helping to identify targets to be vandalized in downtown Toronto.

To cite only a few other incidents of police provocation, there was the widely publicized Germinal affair at the April 2001 Quebec City Summit of the Americas. A few days before the summit, police arrested seven young men traveling to Quebec City, who had in their possession sticks, smoke bombs, dummy grenades and gas masks. The press trumpeted the incident and loudly applauded the draconian security measures surrounding the summit.

Rapidly, however, the affair was shown to have been a state provocation. The reputed leader of the Germinal group was an ex-member of the Canadian Armed Forces. Of the group's 15 members at least two others were RCMP double agents and two more part of the Canadian military. It was one of the soldiers who had introduced the RCMP moles to the Germinal group. The RCMP agents urged the group to use Molotov cocktails in Quebec City, an idea the group rejected citing the possibility of damage or injury. The moles also furnished a large part of the equipment used to incriminate the Germinal members.

A similar anti-democratic modus operandi was unmasked at Montebello, Quebec in 2007, in part through an amateur video posted on the internet. The video documents how Quebec Provincial Police (SQ) cops disguised as anarchist protesters sought to provoke fights between riot police and demonstrators protesting a summit meeting of the US and Mexican presidents and Canada's prime minister.

The video shows three burly, aggressive-looking masked men trying to join a group of smaller, youthful demonstrators wearing black and carrying red flags. One of the police thugs is carrying a sign that says, "An end to war and globalization." Another has a rock in his hand.

One of the demonstration's organizers confronts the three thugs. He asks the one with a rock to drop it and asks all of them to show their faces. One of the masked men then shoves the march organizer and gives him the middle finger. At this moment, a group of peaceful demonstrators begins chanting, "Police, police." One hears a young demonstrator say, "They want to trick us. They want us to be aggressive with them. [...] They are agent provocateurs."

In the meantime, the three masked men quietly approach the riot squad, which is forming a cordon a few paces away. One of them whispers something into

the ear of a policeman. After a brief staged scuffle, the police cordon opens, letting the men through and they are gently placed in handcuffs. As the three walk away, one clearly sees that the fake demonstrators are wearing the same boots as their police escorts.

In keeping with security forces' standard procedure, top SQ officials initially categorically denied that the three men in question were policemen. But after the video was posted to YouTube, the SQ was forced to admit that the men were indeed SQ cops.

The police provocation last month in Montreal came as hundreds of thousands of workers in Quebec were taking strike action against the Liberal government of Premier Phillippe Couillard. Just days before the street protest, the vast majority of Quebec's half-million public sector workers joined a one-day province-wide strike to oppose concessionary contract demands and savage social spending cuts.

The same week saw 8,000 City of Montreal "white collar" workers, who have been without a contract since 2012, stage a one-day walkout and 2,000 Montreal "blue collar" workers defy a provincial Labour Board order prohibiting them from attending a union meeting during working hours.

Under conditions of mounting social unrest, police agencies are more and more placed to the fore as part of the drive by the state to criminalize all forms of working class opposition. These recent incidents of police provocation should be emblazoned on every worker's memory: When the state deploys its repressive apparatus under the pretext of fighting "extremism," it sends its own thugs and agents to make trouble and incite violence. Its objectives are clear: to intimidate demonstrators; to discourage the populace in general from exercising its democratic right to express its opposition to the reactionary agenda of the ruling elite; and to discredit opponents of the government, especially the youth, by smearing them as vandals and criminals.

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