

Police Counterinsurgency Against the Memphis Black Autonomy Federation

Black Autonomy Federation

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Historical Background

Beginning in the 1960's, the Memphis police department had a program to spy on, harass, and illegal hinder persons engaged in radical political action in the city of Memphis. This was during a time of racial segregation in the South, which condoned police murder and brutality by local cops and Ku Klux Klansmen, so police spying was allowed by city and state governments in the Southern USA to maintain the status quo. Many believe that this police spying and subversion helped to result in the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King; but many other figures, most of whom were obscure persons or groups were also spied on by Memphis police and the FBI with its COINTELPRO and the U.S. Department of Justice's Ghetto Informant Program. The latter of which engaged in widespread spying of the entire Black community, and which still exists with another name today.

In 1976, a federal lawsuit was filed against the city of Memphis and the police by the Memphis ACLU, for MPD spying in the late 1960's and early 1970's on anti-Vietnam war groups, civil rights activists, and radical individuals opposed to war, racism and police brutality. As a result of the lawsuit, the U.S. District Court for Western Tennessee issued an order in 1978 that forever forbids the city of Memphis and the police from "...engaging in law enforcement activities which interfere with any person's rights protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution..."

Despite the court order, however, the Memphis police department has found ways to continue to harass its opponents, whether through blatant disregard of the 1978 court order, or adopting new tactics developed in recent times. Beginning in the 1980's, they used "anti-terrorism" legislation to spy, harass, and disrupt the rights of a whole new generation of American activists. This activity is based on a military model of both pacification and rapid military deployment. The Memphis Black Autonomy Federation, created in mid-2012 is being victimized by methods both new and old, which we will explain.

What is Counterinsurgency?

In his groundbreaking article: "The Other Side of The COIN: Counterinsurgency and Community Policing", which was part of a series of essays in the book "Life During Wartime: Resisting Counterinsurgency", AK Press, Oakland, CA.2013, Kristian Williams defined counterinsurgency as "...the process by which those in power try to keep themselves in power by consciously attempting to keep themselves in power by consciously attempting to destroy or render harmless organizations that threaten their power."

This program is different from the COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) of the 1960's where the FBI confronted strong organizations in the 1960's that had an established community base and mass leaders; by contrast, Counterinsurgency is seeking to defeat early stage movements, many just getting started, and to defeat them before they can get a mass leadership or community base. In another place in the essay Kristian Williams describes this as a form of "low intensity warfare", and he says: "This style of warfare is characterized by an attempt to legitimize the legitimate violence of the state, intelligence gathering, security, population control through racial profiling and stop and frisk operations, but most importantly efforts to gain the trust of the people." For instance, the local police argument is: "Sure, the police have to justifiably kill people and may have some corrupt officers in its ranks, but this tactical violence is necessary to keep the

community safe and protect its officers, and that the police department takes great pains to remove corrupt police officers when they are discovered. “Further, the cops take great pains to tell the public that it has a “citizen remedy” to redress police brutality and corruption by going to the police internal affairs division and filing a written complaint. Of course, this is thoroughly bogus, but this is how police citizen-police relations works to legitimize the police and the government, even when there has been an obvious violation of civil rights by law enforcement agents.

All of this propaganda and the idea of a citizen remedy is designed to prevent militant demonstrations by citizens groups or public complaints about corruption or excessive use of force. This process has been referred to as the “Iron Fist in the Velvet Glove”. The “iron fist” being SWAT teams, TACT and riot squads, anti-terrorism, electronic and human spying, and other police military operations, while the “velvet glove” being the use of pacification, public relations, NPO/NGO partnerships, and other “Officer Friendly” programs. The role in the latter capacity is act to restrict the spread of radical ideas, especially criticism of state authorities and police terrorism, preventing radicals from gaining public influence, and disrupt their efforts to establish grassroots oppositional groups.

As Kristian Williams says: “Direct military action is not recommended.. As long as the insurgency is still small, action against it can and should remain a police and intelligence responsibility.” In other words just spy and disrupt such groups through a variety of methods to deny them a public hearing.

Community policing with its “velvet glove” approach of seeking a series of partners, especially among the nonprofit sector, allows the police to project themselves as “problem solvers”. Further, by daily contact with citizens of a particular neighborhood, allows them to recruit informers, the eyes and ears of the police. This pacification method is similar to the military model of “winning the hearts and minds” of the citizens. Thus was born the “soft cop” or “Officer Friendly.”

This is one wing of counterinsurgency, while the other is “militarization.” Militarization comes from first the SWAT team model of the 1970’s to combat Black radicalism, but has now advanced to becoming “an army in cities themselves”, where all cops are essentially part of a military SWAT team. This has been used extensively in the “War on Drugs”, begun during the Reagan administration, and where the Black and POC poor and working class communities have been turned into actual war zones, and several thousand persons have been killed by now.

Police Gang Warfare

The militarization model also allows police population control techniques like racial profiling of Black motorists over a wide area of a city with roadblocks or pursuit cars, as well as stop and frisking innocent people, usually Blacks and Latinos in urban areas. Literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions of innocent people have been swept up in dragnets like this by police all over the country, as well as in the United Kingdom, which has harassed its own Black population using such methods for the last 25 years. The Black community in Memphis, especially in predominately Black South Memphis, is subjected to routine racial profiling, and the stop and search of Black youth by MPD Blue Crush and gang intervention officers.

Even the anti-gangs campaign has a counterinsurgency purpose: to criminalize Black/POC youth, and make them easier to control or crush with public consent. You can hear in Memphis, and most other cities that the police “have to use violence, because these youth are so violent.”

To which we add: Yes, there is violence in our communities, but it is not necessary to create a police state and deprive everyone in our communities of their rights, for the police to end it. The violence of the police actually exacerbates youth violence, and the real objective of the police is just control.

This is why the Blue Crush program of the MPD, which is supposedly used to spy on the poor “high crime” neighborhoods, is just police spying and harassment of Black communities that police deem have forfeited their rights or are too unstable to fight back. So they impose their will through counterinsurgency. The cops and the political establishment fear and want to crush the gangs because they are out of their control and have the possibility of becoming a radical youth insurgency.

This happened in the 1960’s when the Invaders, a Black youth movement developed in Memphis, and the Black Panther Party and other Black militant organizations developed during the Black Power era (1965–1975). So, their strategy is to try to crush them or subvert them into informing for the police. The “Stop Snitching” campaign, which appeared in a number of cities recently, threatens authorities because it undermines the counterinsurgency campaign itself, and exposes it as police repression.

Political Counterinsurgency Campaign Against Black Autonomy

Now all of this is in conjunction with a campaign of spying, harassment, and threats by Memphis police to make us stop our protests, even to falsely advise us that such political actions are illegal, and will land us in jail. We will cover some of this, so that you can understand the depths of this campaign.

Since June, 2012, when the Memphis Black Autonomy Federation (MBAF) started, our group has been subjected to a campaign of surveillance and disruption by the Memphis Police Department (MPD), including phone wiretaps, spying on our travel and whereabouts, and using the so-called “Peace Police”—nonviolent white radical groups working with the cops as pacification agents to subvert our efforts to do community organizing, especially against police brutality.

We started our protests in early Summer of 2012, right after our Black Power Activist Conference in South Memphis, and the police began to immediately harass us.

On July 21, 2012, at Memphis City Hall, Memphis BAF acting coordinators JoNina and Lorenzo Ervin were passing out BAF’s brochure, “The Body Count,” which listed the names and details of the deaths of the seven people who had been killed by Memphis cops between Feb. 2012 and July 3, 2012. A Memphis cop came out of City Hall and told JoNina Ervin that passing out the brochures in front of City Hall was “illegal” and that she would be arrested if she didn’t leave. The officer acted in clear violation of JoNina Ervin’s and the Memphis BAF’s First Amendment rights of free speech and assembly.

On Sept. 8, 2012, the BAF organized a march and rally in downtown Memphis attended by 75 people to protest the police killings of nine people by Memphis cops since Feb., 2012. In an effort to discredit the protest, the article that appeared in the Sept. 9 edition of the Commercial Appeal newspaper reporting on the protest focused on the fact that BAF co-coordinators JoNina and Lorenzo Ervin are former members of Black Panther Party and that Lorenzo is an offender. A person whose family member was killed in 2012 by Memphis police officers and who threatened to sue the cops said they were threatened with being fired from their job if they didn’t stop

speaking out and protesting about the killing. The entire family ended its support of the protest campaign.

In addition, we have been advised that many persons whom we have had contact with have been contacted by the police and warned to stay away from Black Autonomy or they would “get in trouble with the law.”

After the Ku Klux Klan announced their intention to hold a Klan protest demonstration in Memphis for March 30, 2013, Black Autonomy, through its mass anti-racist group, the Ida B. Wells Coalition Against Racism and Police Brutality, applied for a permit to hold a anti-Klan protest at city hall. This city permits office referred this to a group of businessmen to make a decision, rather than the agency, who falsely told the group that it was “already booked by a sing-along group” for that date. After protesting this, Black Autonomy submitted another permit application to the permits office, but this too was denied, claiming that it was “not safe”. We finally filed another permit, and this was approved, but only after we had to threaten them with a lawsuit against the city.

When the police plans for the event were announced publicly, it was clear that 13 square city blocks were deemed a “Klan safety zone” near the Shelby County Courthouse downtown. Barbed wire was strung all through the location, and city residents could not walk or drive through the area, and any person found there was subject to arrest if they would not immediately leave the area.

However, the conditions of approval were clearly unconstitutional. We were forced to go into a “free speech cage” surrounded by a gauntlet of riot police inside, and other police directly facing the protesters, and with snipers on a roof having rifles trained on us. We were stripped of all picket signs, or other pieces of paper, protest banners, or other materials to protest the Klan event, or to express any First amendment rights at all. People were denied entry if they had “offensive” t-shirts that police did not like, expressed any point of view against the Klan or the heavy police presence.

Black Autonomy was especially singled out for threats of arrest, even in a park where we were having a meeting outside the so-called “protest perimeter” before the protest began, with police holding the position that no one in the entire city could hold a protest except at two locations, one set up by the cops and the other setup by the Mayor and Chamber of Commerce some 10 miles away. If you would not agree to this, you were subject to instant arrest. This was clearly police state abuse of authority, and it was enforced by threat of use of force.

The Klan by contrast was allowed to keep its banners, arrived by a special city bus, had a special security detachment, and were given special privileges that no citizen of Memphis was allowed. The Mayor and other officials took the posture that we were “rioter” because of some event that happen in 1998, 15 years previous. We were not Memphis residents in 1998, and in fact many of the protesters were so young that 15 years ago they were children, but this did not matter, it was the white racists whose rights that mattered, not ours, and we were guilty of planning a “riotous assembly”, so our rights were suspended.

On May 28, 2013, Memphis Police Association president Mike Williams attended a press conference organized by Operation Help Civil Rights Group, in which MBAF participated. The press conference was called about police association billboards saying Memphis isn’t a safe city because the cops are underpaid. Although he tried to hide among reporters, Williams’ presence was meant to intimidate Operation Help and MBAF. He had a tablet computer and was typing

on it throughout the press conference, except to take photographs of JoNina Ervin and Wendol Lee, who were conducting the press conference

The BAF held a Community Forum on “Mass Imprisonment and the Black Community,” on August 17, 2013. Four people who identified themselves as being members of a church, came to the forum and attempted to disrupt it by quoting from their Bibles and saying that black people wouldn’t be in prisons in such large numbers if they just believed in God and went to church. Since these Christian pastors and others are open allies of the Mayor and police officials, we believe these persons were dispatched as agent provocateurs to subvert and disrupt the event. They clearly did not come for any legitimate purpose of political discussion.

Since June, 2012, when the Memphis Black Autonomy Federation (MBAF) started, our group has been subjected to a campaign of surveillance and disruption by the Memphis Police Department (MPD), including phone wiretaps, spying on our travel and whereabouts, and using the so-called “Peace Police”--nonviolent white radical groups working with the cops as pacification agents to subvert our efforts to do community organizing, especially against police brutality.

After the Trayvon Martin acquittal verdict of George Zimmerman, Black Autonomy and its allies held a protest picket line of July 15, 2013 at the 201 Poplar headquarters of city court and the Memphis Police Department. During the protest, which was held on the sidewalk entrance of the building, an unidentified plainclothes police officer came out of the complex and saw us there. He asked “who are you guys and what are you doing?” He then took out a cell phone camera and began taking pictures of protesters. When no one would answer him, he then left, but then came back by the scene in an unmarked police car, and took additional pictures and then roared off. This was clearly political surveillance to compile a dossier and to chill the participants.

Finally, a mail bomb believed to emanate from MPD cops wiped out internet service for 10 days in August 2013. In addition, police are believed to be tapping our phone lines and monitoring our mail service, and conducting other surveillance of Black Autonomy.

This should be reported in the news media, but what the authorities have done in Memphis is even seize control of the mass media, including Black radio stations, and have them block access to Black Autonomy and its spokespersons, and to prevent us from putting out our ideas, have the ability to publish a letter to the editor, have our press releases accepted by local media sources, to put a radio public services advisory on local stations, and even have denied all access to public access cable television which is dominated by Christian preachers, who are allies of the mayor (over 20 hours a week), and act as a propaganda wing of state religion. In Memphis, from the first, the local media had to submit their articles or electronic news reports about Black Autonomy criticizing police brutality, to the mayor or Chief of Police before it could be aired.

Now, it seems that we are not able to put any information to the media at all using the local establishment media. Speaking and writing about police brutality and holding marches and rallies against police brutality, which the MBAF has done, is our First Amendment right. Memphis city officials and police are in clear violation of the 1978 federal court order by spying and engaging in other activities to suppress and disrupt the work of the MBAF. Memphis police have killed at least 23 people since February, 2012--more people than police have killed in any other American city in this time period, and the citizens of this city have a right to know how they are performing their duties.

The Memphis Police Department's "Peace Police"

In early 2012, just when the Memphis police began a reign of terror which has resulted in the deaths of 23 people so far, the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center initiated an arrangement with the Memphis Police Department's "Community-Police Relations Committee." This program is designed to pacify the Black community, in order to place them under the authority of the police and the city gov't, and to keep them from participating in militant protests against police brutality.

And using this so-called "Peace Police"--nonviolent white and Black radical groups working with the cops as pacification agents to subvert our efforts to do community organizing, especially against police brutality, they want to eliminate Black Autonomy their own source of competition. This includes the Memphis NAACP, whose current President, Pastor Keith Norman, is a paid consultant to the Memphis Police Department, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is an ally in this venture, along with various Black Christian preachers.

The role of these groups is not limited to mere public relations, it is also part of the counterinsurgency of the MPD to destroy or stifle insurgent movements, especially those protesting against the cops. They have even telling Black people in the community that Black Autonomy is trying to stir up trouble to "start a riot."

In its own words: "We are working to implement a citywide community-police reconciliation project to heal old wounds, prevent future harm and build respect and trust between the African-American, Latino, youth, and GLBTQ communities and local law enforcement. The project will create safe space, where project participants can learn, reflect, and build the trust necessary to move beyond exploration to action on identified problems that have a negative impact on community-police dynamics." They admit that: "1. We have some individuals who are sincerely offended of anyone thinking that the community and police needs to reconcile. We have some who think the job of the police is only to harass and put people in jail."

Since there is such bitterness in the community towards the MPD, then how will the Peace police overcome this, again here is what they say: "Community members and members of law enforcement from the Memphis Police Department (MPD) and the Shelby County Sheriff's Department met in separate circles for several months until November 16, 2012, when these two groups joined. This CPR "core" group has been meeting monthly ever since, working together to face the challenges and overcome the barriers that have traditionally kept community and law enforcement divided at many levels. So, for 9 nine months, they met among themselves and with Peace and Justice staff members to "soften" them up, and then gave them to the police, and for the last year, they have been meeting with each other.

This is clearly a snitching program, to find out information about alleged crimes in the community and to enlist citizens who attend the event to work as undercover informants for the police. The police can begin investigations, make arrests, or spy on the parties named by the citizens in attendance. Now this is bad enough that the "Peace Police" acts as MPD police agents to get informers or cooperative citizens, but their real role is to control political opposition against the government, moving it in a safe, institutional and reformist direction. The MidSouth Peace and Justice Center is a front group for the Socialist Party USA, and its own agenda is to help police to destroy Black Autonomy , so that it can then have political hegemony and encounter no Black community political opposition for its activities, now and in the future.

The clearest indication that this group are agents of the police and are being used to destroy our work was the run-up to the March 30, 2013 Klan demonstration. When Black Autonomy were calling for a protest campaign against the rising activism of the Ku Klux Klan, the “Peace Police” were meeting with Memphis police and the Sheriff’s Office and helping them devise a security plan to stifle expected anti-Klan protests, including telling police how to put activists into a cage, how to position riot police in rows in front of the cage, and helping the mayor, cops, and Chamber of Commerce to create an alternate site to draw people away from the anti-Klan protests downtown.

Then Bennett Foster and other members of the Peace and Justice Center contacted activists in the Kansas City Ida B. Wells Coalition, (co-organizers of the anti-Klan demonstration in Memphis), began to post slanderous items about Black Autonomy and thus, they hoped, shake the confidence of IBWC and get them not and other out of town anti-fascists to not come to Memphis, or if they did come to recognize the Peace police as leaders of the event. They had set up a bogus coalition with the Mayor, police chief, and chamber of commerce in opposition to the real anti-Klan coalition. Naturally they did not want the Klan smashed, and just repeated the establishment line of “just ignore them, and they will go away.”

Their whole campaign was the worst form of treachery and sellout to the government, and exposes the logic of Left-Liberal authoritarian socialism. They must be exposed and smashed right along with the corrupt capitalist police and government. They are counter-revolutionaries, and fear the overthrow of capitalism, but oppose even militant grassroots campaign to protect the democratic rights of the poor and low income workers. They are enemies of the people.

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