

Documents Obtained by ACLU Expose FBI and Police Targeting of Political Groups

ACLU Files Federal Lawsuit and FOIA Requests to Uncover More Files in Georgia

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ATLANTA - The American Civil Liberties Union charged today that the FBI and local police are engaging in intimidation based on political association and are improperly investigating law-abiding human rights and advocacy groups, according to documents obtained through a series of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. ACLU affiliates today filed FOIA requests seeking similar documents in ten states.

In Georgia, spy files were requested by American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia on behalf of the ACLU itself and the Georgia Peace and Justice Coalition, School of the America's Watch, Women's Action for New Directions, Atlanta Refuse and Resist and Atlanta Independent Media Center. These groups were instrumental in organizing protests at the G-8 Summit, Fort Benning, and the office of former Senator Zell Miller. In addition, individuals from these organizations, and individuals who have been questioned by law enforcement, are seeking their surveillance files

"For years peaceful protest groups that call Georgia home have been sued, searched, questioned and spied upon," said Gerald Weber, Legal Director of the ACLU of Georgia.

Father Roy Bourgeois, founder of School of the Americas Watch, who has helped organize an annual non-violent demonstration at the gate to Fort Benning for over a decade, is among the individuals seeking documents.

"It's a sad day when a group of people who are working for peace and justice, believers in non-violence, have to fear that they are under surveillance," said Father Roy. "We believe dissent is patriotic."

In response to widespread complaints from students and political activists who said they were questioned by FBI agents in the months leading up to last summer's political conventions, the ACLU filed FOIA requests in six states and the District of Columbia in December 2004, on behalf of more than 100 groups and individuals. To date, the ACLU has received fewer than 20 pages in response to the FOIAs.

The ACLU charged that the FBI is wrongfully withholding thousands of pages of documents, and today filed a lawsuit in federal court to compel the FBI to comply with the FOIA requests. The complaint seeks files kept by the FBI on the ACLU, as well as Greenpeace, United for Peace and Justice, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

The ACLU said that the few documents received to date through the December FOIA requests shed light on the FBI's misuse of Joint Terrorism Task Forces to engage in political surveillance. In Colorado, one memo indicates an ongoing federal interest in Food Not Bombs, a group that provides free vegetarian food to hungry people and protests war and poverty.

The same memo suggests that an FBI interview of Sarah Bardwell and call to Scott Silber prior to last fall's political conventions were intended as a means of intimidation. The FBI notes that

although they did not obtain information about criminal activity from either student, it was unnecessary to contact others in the area as the “purpose of the interviews was served.”

“The FBI is taking tax dollars and resources established to fight terrorism and instead spying on innocent Americans who have done nothing more than speak out or practice their faith,” said Ann Beeson, ACLU Associate Legal Director. “By recruiting the local police into these activities, they are also sowing dissent and suspicion in communities around the country.”

The documents obtained by the ACLU are not the only evidence that the FBI is building files on activists, Beeson said. A classified FBI intelligence memorandum disclosed publicly in November 2003 revealed that the FBI has actually directed police to target and monitor lawful political demonstrations under the rubric of fighting terrorism. This memo is available at <http://www.aclu.org/SafeandFree/SafeandFree.cfm?ID=14450&c=206>.

For details and legal papers regarding the FOIA requests filed today by ACLU affiliates around the country, including a list of clients, go to www.aclu.org/spyfiles.