

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

ACLU Files Federal Lawsuit and FOIA Request in Idaho to Uncover More Files

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WASHINGTON – 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. The ACLU of Idaho and nine other ACLU affiliates today filed FOIA requests seeking similar documents.

“Since when did feeding the homeless become a terrorist activity?” asked ACLU Associate Legal Director Ann Beeson. “When the FBI and local law enforcement target groups like Food Not Bombs under the guise of fighting terrorism, many Americans who oppose government policies will be discouraged from speaking out and exercising their rights.”

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,” Beeson said. “By recruiting the local police into these activities, they are also sowing dissent and suspicion in communities around the country.”

The FOIA requests filed today include requests from individuals and groups in Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wisconsin. The FOIAs seek two kinds of information: the actual FBI files of groups and individuals targeted for speaking out; and information about how the practices and funding structure of the task forces, known as JTTFs, may be encouraging rampant and unwarranted spying.

The ACLU's clients comprise a Who's Who of national and local advocates for well-known causes, including the environment, animal rights, labor, religion, Native American rights, fair trade, grassroots politics, peace, social justice, nuclear disarmament, human rights and civil liberties. Requests also were filed on behalf of numerous individuals.

In Idaho, the ACLU is requesting information on behalf of the Idaho Progressive Student Alliance (IPSA), a non-partisan student group that focuses on social, economic, gender and environmental justice. IPSA President Arielle Anderson and Secretary Audra Green were questioned by FBI agents in March 2004 regarding the IPSA's boycott of Taco Bell to protest the conditions of Immokalee workers in Florida. Throughout the questioning, FBI agents suggested that the IPSA was related to other groups who commit violent acts.

"The interrogation was intimidating and threatening," said Green. "They made baseless accusations with the intent of dissuading us from future political participation."

The controversial FBI-led task forces came under renewed scrutiny last month after Portland, Oregon became the first city in the nation to withdraw local law enforcement participation from the JTTFs rather than allow them to participate without proper oversight. The JTTF partnerships between the FBI and local police, in which local officers are "deputized" as federal agents, are intended to identify and monitor individuals and groups implicated in terrorism. But the ACLU charges that these task forces are allowing local police officers to target peaceful political and religious groups with no connection to terrorism.

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.