

BLACKLIST BLOG

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Spycops scandal: All police files must be released, victimised site workers say

Reference to Papers
400/84/165

BOX 500

IF REQUIRED, REFER TO
DETAILS OF HOW THIS INFOR
OBTAINED BY FILE REF
HN82

a) Privacy one of the five-man 'Laing's Lockout Committee', reported on the continuing dispute with the John Laing construction company over working conditions and the use of 'lump' labour at the Company's Surbiton building site. While the Lockout Committee's cause has been considerably aided by the interest shown, and publicity from, left-wing groups in relation to what is seen as the High Court's unique application of the 1980 Employment Act (a decision against named individuals rather than union organisations) as illustrated by the attached 'Surbiton Six' leaflet from the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), their efforts very recently suffered a setback with the outcome of a National Conciliation Panel enquiry into the dispute. The Panel, comprising trade union and employer's representatives, limited the scope of the dispute to the original Surbiton site and instructed the Lockout Committee's union, the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), not to support the Committee's broader activities, thereby compounding the High Court injunctions which ordered their picket to be restricted to Surbiton. In terms of effective picketing, the most damaging side to this result was that Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) members, representing drivers

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Campaigners are calling for the release of all police files relating to the spycops scandal, after recently disclosed Special Branch documents prove that undercover police reported on union members speaking at meetings to request solidarity.

One such file (**400/84/165**, excerpt reproduced above), until recently subject to a Restriction Order, was compiled by an undercover police spy who used the cover name Nicholas Green when attending a meeting of left-wing activists held in March 1986. The meeting was held at the Cock Tavern in Euston, which has been the venue for trade union and left wing campaigns for decades. The majority of the Special Branch file is a report of a speech given by Brian Higgins, a Scottish bricklayer and activist in UCATT (the building workers' union).

Higgins was one of six construction workers who were sacked by the blacklisting building contractor, John Laing, in a dispute about direct employment. The victimised workers were collectively known as the Laing's Lock Out Committee. Taking place at the same time as the miners' strike, the industrial action gained a high profile at the time and saw a High Court Injunction being granted against all the pickets.

The police file records how Higgins spoke about developments in the dispute and made a request for solidarity from those present. Both the financial appeal leaflet and an 8 page rank & file paper called 'Building Worker' are included in the police report. The first page of the file is stamped 'BOX 500', which indicates that the report was sent to MI5. The last page of the report shows the Special Branch file numbers for Brian Higgins himself, and for the construction union UCATT.

In an internal police report known as Operation Reuben, the police admit that intelligence gathered by undercover policing was shared by both Special Branch and the security services, with employers and the notorious blacklisting organisations; the Economic League and the Consulting Association.

Brian Higgins was one of many union activists spied on by undercover police and blacklisted by major construction employers. He passed away in 2019, so never got to see any of the documentary evidence of police spying. On viewing the police file reporting on their father, Monica and Noelle Higgins issued a joint statement:

"Our dad campaigned for better health and safety and workers' rights all of his life. He always said Special Branch were involved in his blacklisting, and this is now proven beyond any doubt. It's just a bit of a strange feeling to see it in print. Treated as enemies of the state, as if you were planning civil unrest or domestic terror attacks! It's unbelievable, but shows how scared the state are of militant workers, and how far they are prepared to go. The police saw this as politics, but the impact on our family was very personal."

The Blacklist Support Group (BSG), the campaign representing blacklisted union members, is a core participant in the public inquiry. The Special Branch file was disclosed to BSG but with Restriction Orders put in place meaning that until now the files were not allowed to be shared in the public domain. Dave Smith, BSG secretary (himself a core participant in the inquiry and an ex-UCATT Branch Secretary and) commented:

"The undercover cop known as Nicholas Green reported on UCATT member Brian Higgins: but it could have happened to absolutely any union activist asking for solidarity

while on strike. Speaking at meetings during an industrial dispute is a perfectly legal union activity: it is not subversion. Despite police denials, the UK political police units were gathering intelligence on trade unionists prepared to stand up for workers' rights. There is now conclusive evidence that Special Branch infiltrated trade union meetings and kept files on every trade union in the UK. To get to the truth of this anti-democratic state spying on trade unions, all the spycops files need to be disclosed to those who were spied on".

PAPER OF THE RANK AND FILE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY Price 10p

Building Worker

Issue 20 JANUARY 1986

'OUR VICTORY IS YOUR VICTORY'

'Let's have a return to Victorian standards', says Mrs Thatcher. The employers thought of that idea long before Thatcher went public on it. *'The Boys From the Black Stuff'* is not just a television drama for the majority of construction workers — it is a stark reality. And worse, standards on most building sites are so bad as to be almost pre-historic.

Over 150 building workers are killed every year in 'accidents' on British building sites. Thousands are seriously injured and maimed. Some are violently attacked for daring to question wages, safety or general conditions. Many more have been sacked and threatened with violence for the same. Many trade union activists have been blacklisted (see box) by employers who place them on a national register and refuse them the right to work, sometimes, unfortunately, with the connivance of the less scrupulous TU officials.

Laing Homes

Against this background, seven UCATT members, one labourer and six bricklayers, started work for Jonoroy Brickwork at the Laings Homes site at Glenbuck Road, Surbiton. We had all been previously employed on the Mowlem site at Wimbledon police station. (see article on the same.)

One of the directors of Jonoroy Brickwork has been a director of Whites Brickwork when it was the sub-contractor that employed two bricklayers at the Crouch site, Purley Way, Croydon, who were bludgeoned to the ground by a hired thug in the presence of two of the firm's directors. One had received a fractured skull and is so seriously injured that he is unlikely ever to work again. His brother received nine stitches to a head wound. Needless to say, no one has been apprehended in connection with this horrific attack as the police have done sweet FA about it, although they turned up in force soon after to harass a protest outside the gate by forty building workers. Contrast this with the diligence and enthusiasm that they had in 'finding' those accused of attacking scabs and Coal Board 'property' during the miners strike.

So it was with some trepidation that we went about our work when we found out who our new employers were. To cut a long story short . . . Laings instructed Jonoroy to sack us, but because of our record of struggle against major employers and sub-contractors, Jonoroy was reluctant to carry out these orders. Eventually they were forced to sack us on Friday 18th October, 1985.

It was the obvious and blatant use of the blacklist to victimise known trades unionists and to prevent us from organising in our industry against death, maiming and exploitation. Most things are negotiable, but not the sack



on a job where we had been promised at least six months work. We took a stand and went into struggle against the blacklist and the use of lump labour to divide and rule workers in the construction industry. We also demanded Direct Employment, in line with all the construction unions conference policies. The London Regional Council of UCATT supported our stand.

But we knew that such a struggle would not be won outside the gate of the Surbiton site. We picketted another Laing site at Church Lane, Tooting. It was totally riddled with lump, 714s and 30%, contrary to all national agreements. Laings ran for the cover of a Regional Conciliation Panel. On the morning of the panel, Laings brought in scab labour from all over the country, including the same lorry drivers that scabbed on the miners, to crash through the picket line. We responded by putting a picket on the prestigious Laings job in High Street, Kensington. These jobs were now being picketted. Others were picketted on a guerrilla, hit and run basis.

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Operation Reuben Unpicked – by Undercover Research Group: <https://specialbranchfiles.uk/operation-reuben-unpicked-pt1/>

Special Branch file 400/84/165 on the Undercover Policing Inquiry website: <https://www.ucpi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/UCPI0000026544.pdf>

Blacklist Support Group

book: <http://newint.org/books/politics/blacklisted-secret-war/>

video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNcgrNs6pB8>

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