

United States: Democrats Extoll the FBI and the National Security State

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The most effective way to counter Donald Trump's reactionary policies is through mass action. The Democratic Party hopes to steer movements and individuals opposed to Trump into support of its candidates. While this trap of "lesser evil" politics has proved to be a failure over and over again for the past eight decades, there is another, outright reactionary, content to the Democrat's current anti-Trump campaign.

The Democrats, their supporters in the mass media, and most self-styled "progressives" are on a drive to whitewash the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the current squabble between the FBI and Trump concerning Russia.

They also accuse Trump of violating "national security," and not sufficiently defending "classified" information and furthering leaks of such state secrets to Wikileaks - which is implied to be in collusion with Russia against the United States.

All wings of the Democrats have fallen in line behind this campaign, with even Senators Bernie Sanders and "reformer" Elizabeth Warren going along, even if quietly.

According to the Democrats and their followers like CNN, former FBI directors Robert Mueller, who is heading up an investigation into collusion between Russia and Trump, and James Comey, whom Trump fired last year, are completely above any criticism - absolutely endowed with sterling characters and are utterly straight arrows.

Moreover, the FBI itself is the "greatest law enforcement agency in the world," according to one commentator.

The reality is that the FBI is one of the most important of the array of political police agencies in the U.S. government, and has been from its beginning.

The FBI traces its origins to the early 1900s, to agencies formed to investigate federal crimes, under the Department of Justice. In 1909, it was named the Bureau of Investigation. With the entry of the U.S. into WWI, the Bureau was charged with investigating draft resisters, violators of the Espionage Act of 1917, and immigrants suspected of socialist or anarchist views. Organizations like the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World, the Socialist Party, and Socialist Labor Party were also included.

During the war, the radical press was largely suppressed and there were arrests of radical leaders.

Unlike other parties in the Second International, the U.S. Socialist Party did not support the war. This was especially true of the left wing of the SP, whose best known spokesperson was Eugene Debs. Debs supported the Russian Revolution, although he did not join either of the two formations that would later fuse to form the Communist Party, which was also put on the Bureau's hit list.

In June 1918, Debs gave a fiery speech in Canton, Ohio, in which he blasted the war and supported the Russian Revolution. He was arrested under the Espionage Act, convicted, and after appeals were denied, imprisoned. The Espionage Act is still being used today as a tool against radical dissent (more below).

Debs, in jail, was nominated by the SP for its presidential candidate in 1920, in spite of his sharp criticisms of the right wing of the party, including its attacks on the Communists. He received one million votes, 3.4 percent.

After the war, the man who was to mold the FBI for half a century, J. Edgar Hoover, joined the Bureau. During the "Red Scare" of 1919-1920, Hoover worked under Bureau Director Mitchell Palmer to help carry out mass arrests in what became known as the "Palmer Raids."

Deeply opposed to socialism and the Russian Revolution, Hoover came into his own. He set up a card index system listing every radical leader, organization and publication in the United States. By 1921 he had amassed some 450,000 files. More than 10,000 suspected communists were arrested in this period, and many immigrant radicals deported.

Hoover became Bureau Director in 1924, a post he held until his death in 1972. In that whole period the Bureau (renamed the FBI in the 1930s) was the main anti-communist, anti-Black, anti-union etc. witch-hunting tool of the government. Without going into this whole history, here are some highlights: in the 1930s, Hoover was instructed by Roosevelt to keep tabs on communist organizations and other "suspected" individuals. He was quite zealous in carrying out this directive, even listing Roosevelt's own wife, Eleanor, and other liberals.

Of course under surveillance were militant leaders of the great labor upsurge of the 1930s that created the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Socialists and communists were among those leaders.

The FBI was instrumental in the Roosevelt administration's using the 1940 Smith Act to indict and convict leaders of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party of "conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government." Among the defendants were leaders of the Teamsters' union. This was part of taming the union movement in preparation for the upcoming war.

During WWII, the FBI expanded its arsenal of wiretaps and other electronic surveillance of "subversives." After the war, the FBI was instrumental in carrying out the anti-communist witch-hunt begun by the Democratic Truman administration in 1947. The new "Red Scare" deepened over the next decade, in the context of the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

The FBI worked closely with the witch-hunting committees in Congress, the House Un-American Committee (HUAC) and in the Senate under the chairmanship of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Thousands in the union movement, the government, churches and even Hollywood were purged, prosecuted and persecuted. The right wing of the labor bureaucracy was only too pleased to join in to remove militants in the unions.

As part of the witch-hunt, Hoover established a special anti-gay unit, to root out gays in the government and increase the persecution of gays generally. McCarthy charged that gays and communists had taken over parts of the government and the Democratic Party.

McCarthyism, as the campaign became known, grew to include grass roots committees across the country. It represented an incipient fascist movement, finally cut short by alarmed sections of the ruling class, which did not need fascism at that time as it wasn't threatened by any working class upsurge.

When a new stage in the Black movement began with the Montgomery bus boycott challenging racist apartheid in the South in 1955-56, Hoover established a secret program called COINTEL (counter intelligence) to combat it and communists, socialists and believers in democracy who supported Black rights.

As the radicalization of the 1960s and early 1970s developed, spearheaded by the civil rights and Black Liberation movements, as well as the youth radicalization centered on the anti-Vietnam-war movement, COINTEL expanded. All Black and antiwar (and later women's and gay and lesbian liberation) groups were targeted in addition to the socialist organizations already in the FBI's sights.

One result of this radicalization was the exposure of the secret COINTEL program in the 1970s, when activists broke into an FBI office and found the documents. Other revelations were made by a lawsuit brought by the Socialist Workers Party, supported by the entire left except the Stalinist groups, against government spying, break-ins and other illegal activities directed against the SWP, that also exposed the same dirty tricks against many other groups. Others also brought actions revealing FBI crimes.

In the reaction against "The Sixties" that has developed increasingly since, the FBI and other political police agencies have regained their former role. Just two more recent examples: One was the FBI spearheading the anti-Muslim witch-hunt, including frame-ups and entrapments, after the September 11, 2001 attacks. This campaign was headed by then FBI director from 2001 to 2013, Robert Mueller - now the Democrat's darling.

Another was the exposure by Edward Snowden of the vast gathering of phone, email, and other messages of all Americans and many others internationally, by the National Security Agency. The NSA says it only records the time, and sources and recipients, of these messages. It only actually read them when it wants to.

When the Black Lives Matter protests erupted, James Comey, then director of the FBI, denounced it as anti-police. (In the 2016 election Comey also opened investigations against candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. In doing so, he was following in the shoes of Hoover, who compiled dossiers over the years of important government figures, to be able to hold embarrassing material over them. Trump fired Comey when he wouldn't give up his investigation of the new president.)

What is referred to as "the intelligence community" - all the political police agencies - is also extolled by the Democrats who hope Mueller will be able to get rid of Trump. This "community" has released statements that it has proof of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential elections (all countries meddle in the affairs of others if they can, with the U.S. being meddler in chief).

The hope is they will find collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russians to help elect Trump. But the "intelligence community" says it can't give its "proof" because to do so would betray "national security." They all swear their present secret facts are much better than the secret facts they asserted in the lead-up to the disastrous invasion of Iraq about Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, facts that turned out not to exist.

The Democrats also extol the virtues of "national security". What is meant by "national security"? It means the security of U.S. imperialism. A case in point was the conviction carried out by the Obama administration of Chelsea Manning under the Espionage Act for releasing "classified" information about U.S. war crimes in Iraq. One document she released was a video taken by U.S. soldiers of their executing Iraqi civilians from a helicopter gun ship, while chuckling about it.

Besides the case of Eugene Debs, this Act was used only twice before 2008. Then Obama used it

nine times, convicting whistleblowers of revealing government crimes, not of conveying any information to a foreign government or organization. It now hangs over the head of Snowden and Julian Assange of Wikileaks. Who were these people spying for? I guess the people of the U.S. and the world.

A high-up aide in Trump's White House, Robert Porter, has recently been exposed as a wife beater, and was forced to resign. The Democrats correctly brought Trump to task for defending Porter. But they are more and more centering on the fact that Porter had access to "classified" material, and demanding that there be better background checks before people can see such government secrets.

Hundreds of millions of documents are hidden by the U.S. government under the "classified" label. They are secret for a good reason. Most would reveal information about U.S. crimes or other embarrassing material, that would harm U.S. capitalist and imperialist interests if the U.S. people and the rest of the world knew about them.

The Democrats and their apologists, by burnishing the sordid record of the FBI, by defending the Espionage Act, hiding U.S. crimes and embarrassing information under "national security" and the "classified" label do not further the struggle against Trump's real crimes of war, racism, misogyny, homophobia, massive attacks on workers' living standards, etc. - they do the opposite. They further the increasing consolidation of the national security state, which furthers the development of authoritarianism, like Trump's.

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