



State of Fear

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/state_of_fear_20130107/

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By Chris Hedges

Shannon McLeish of Florida is a 45-year-old married mother of two young children. She is a homeowner, a taxpayer and a safe driver. She votes in every election. She attends a Unitarian Universalist church on Sundays. She is also, like nearly all who have a relationship with the Occupy movement in the United States, being monitored by the federal government. She knows this because when she read FBI documents obtained by the [Partnership for Civil Justice Fund](http://www.justiceonline.org/) (PCJF) through the Freedom of Information Act, she was startled to see a redaction that could only be referring to her. McLeish's story is the story of hundreds of thousands of people—perhaps more—whose lives are being invaded by the state. It is the story of a security and surveillance apparatus—overseen by the executive branch under Barack Obama—that has empowered the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security to silence the voices and obstruct the activity of citizens who question corporate power.

Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, executive director of the PCJF, said in a written statement about the released files: “This production [of information], which we believe is just the tip of the iceberg, is a window into the nationwide scope of the FBI’s surveillance, monitoring, and reporting on peaceful protesters organizing with the Occupy movement. These documents show that the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security are treating protests against the corporate and banking structure of America as potential criminal and terrorist activity. These documents also show these federal agencies functioning as a de facto intelligence arm of Wall Street and Corporate America.”

The FBI documents are not only a chilling example of how widespread this surveillance and obstruction has become, they are an explicit warning by the security services to all who consider dissent. Anyone who defies corporate power, even if he or she is nonviolent and acting within constitutional rights, is a suspect. These documents are part of the plan to make us fearful, compliant and disempowered. They mark, I suspect, a government attempt to end peaceful mass protests by responding with repression to the grievances of Americans. When the corporate-financed group [FreedomWorks](http://www.freedomworks.org/) bused in goons to disrupt Democratic candidates’ town hall meetings about the federal health care legislation in August 2009, Eric Zuesse of the Business Insider notes, “there was no FBI surveillance of those corporate-organized disruptions of legitimate democratic processes. There also were no subsequent FreedomWorks applications for Freedom of Information Act releases of FBI files regarding such surveillance being used against them—because there was no such FBI campaign against them.”

The combination of intimidation tactics by right-wing fringe groups, which speak in the language of violence and hate, with the state’s massive intrusion into the personal affairs of the citizen is corporate fascism. And we are much farther down that road than many of us care to admit.

“When activists took up relatively long-term residence in Zuccotti Park in New York City on Sept. 17 [in 2011], their message of outrage was a mirror to my own after we bailed out the banks with our tax dollars, then watched them get off scot-free without even a token attempt to help fix the wreckage they’d created,” McLeish told me over the phone when I called her home. “I personally lost considerable income and my retirement with the economic collapse, as well as more than half the value of my home. I could see the people around me struggling, too. I have friends, neighbors and family members that the banks refused to help, who lost their homes or were forced to pay for costly attorneys to defend themselves against fraudulent foreclosure attempts. People couldn’t sell their homes, as they were worth so much less than what they’d paid for them. Homes all over the area, including in my neighborhood right near the downtown [of Ormond Beach, Fla.], were abandoned due to the foreclosure crisis—and left to rot by the banks. Strip malls were emptied as businesses went bankrupt and closed their doors. More and more homeless people were wandering through the neighborhood—people you could tell had never been homeless, just by virtue of what and how much they carried with them. Families were sleeping behind big-box stores, and my area was featured on national news repeatedly for the number of homeless families.”

“These are some of the things that prompted me to create a Facebook page for Occupy in my area in solidarity with the courageous activists camping in Zuccotti—the only group to fully give voice to what I saw as the issue: the corruption of pretty much everything from the economy to the environment to our social safety nets to our democratic system of governance due to corporate greed,” she said. “The message of OWS [Occupy Wall Street] resonated deeply and moved me to action.”

The FBI documents obtained by the PCJF show that government security services began to monitor the activities of Occupy activists before the Zuccotti Park encampment was established. They revealed that when McLeish met with about 40 other activists in Daytona Beach, Fla., several undercover law enforcement officers were present.

“None of them identified themselves as law enforcement to meeting attendees, though a Homeland Security agent approached me afterward, probably because I facilitated the meeting,” McLeish said. “When the agent approached me after the meeting, it was pretty unnerving. I decided the best way to deal with it was head on. I responded with, ‘I’m so glad you’re here! There’s a group making threats against us. I assume that’s why you’ve come.’ I think he was surprised. I don’t think he acknowledged knowing about the threats from an online gun group. He said he wanted to make sure we weren’t infiltrated by troublemakers. He asked if we’d meet with law enforcement to find out what we were allowed to do. I said I’d be happy to do so. He said he would check into the threats. He said he would put me in touch with someone from the Daytona Beach Police Department.”

“I can’t remember exactly when we met with Daytona Beach Police Department the first time,” she said. “It could have been the next day or the day after. There were about six or seven of us, and I think it was three officers: Deputy Chief Ben Walton, who is now retired, and two other high-ranking officers. If I remember correctly, I pretty much began the discussion by stating that we were aware of our right to protest. We would be glad to coordinate as much as possible to make the Police Department’s job easier, but not to the point of infringing upon our rights.”

“We agreed upon very low police presence—one to a few officers—on the basis of the threats made by the online gun group, but not for surveillance on citizens engaged in peaceful protest,” she said.

The daylong event she and the other activists held on Oct. 15, 2011, was attended by more than 300 people. The past president of the local NAACP chapter spoke, as did a leader in the teachers union who was also a member of the school board, a couple of members of the postal union, the leader of a homeless coalition who was homeless himself, and a member of the Daytona State College Environmental Club. A female uniformed officer was present. McLeish noticed a man with a professional camera taking photographs of individual protesters in the crowd. She saw him later the same day amid several police officers. One officer confirmed that the photographer was with law enforcement but would not give more information, McLeish said.

Daytona-area activists during the fall of 2011 continued to organize events, including sidewalk marches to banks. In most cases they notified the police in advance. At one big event, men in plain clothes and standing with folded arms surrounded a seated group as it held a teach-in.

“It was extremely intimidating, not to mention the effect on people walking by who might have joined us if it weren’t for these heavy-handed tactics,” McLeish said.

The local activists set up an Occupy encampment every weekend in December 2011.

“There were no incidents of any kind,” McLeish said of the camp in Daytona. “No one spoke aggressively to an officer at any time. No one drank or used drugs. We had clearly posted rules to that effect at the camp. There was no violence whatsoever, verbal or physical—as was the case with any event we organized, and we had quite a lot of them. Further, we clearly expressed that while we would act in accordance with our rights, we would not violate any laws.”

“Given the lengths we went to, you can imagine my dismay as I saw Daytona repeatedly mentioned in national news as one of the main areas under surveillance by the FBI, Homeland Security, as well as some unknown ‘private partner’ agency,” she said. “We were being investigated, according to the released FBI documents, as if we were a ‘terrorist’ group engaged in ‘criminal activity.’ I checked the released pages to see what could only be references to me—my name, age, and phone number. Though redacted, they indicate that any search of people connected with domestic terrorist groups is likely to turn up my name.”

Since the spring of 2012 McLeish has co-hosted a morning radio show called “Air Occupy” (<http://www.airoccupy.com/>) (also streamed online) with Liz Myers and Jerry Bolkcom. They have interviewed, among others, Alexa O’Brien, the organizer of US Day of Rage, and Carl Mayer, the lead attorney in the case *Hedges v. Obama*, a challenge to the indefinite detention clause of the National Defense Authorization Act. Immediately after “Air Occupy” posted on YouTube the interview about the lawsuit against the NDAA, YouTube permanently banned the radio show on the ground of “violating community standards”—a ban that usually is imposed for graphic, violent or gory images or pornography. According to YouTube’s guidelines, a poster is allowed three “strikes” (<http://support.google.com/youtube/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=92486>) before an account is terminated. “Air Occupy” had received no notice of “strikes” or warnings of any kind from YouTube.

McLeish worries about how being a target of FBI attention will affect her life. “Can the inclusion of my name and information on a federal law enforcement domestic terrorist watch list impact my ability to make a living and provide for my children?” she asked. “Can I be subject to retribution of some kind through the NDAA’s new provisions (http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/criminalizing_dissent_20120813/) or to federal surveillance due to interviewing other activists or in addition to my involvement in Occupy protests? I can’t afford an attorney to protect myself.”

“What does such surveillance and militarized response mean for our democratic system of governance as more and more people in our country and abroad struggle to survive and are moved to protest stark economic inequalities, mass unemployment and unfair working conditions, and impoverished living conditions?” she asked.



Illustration by Mr. Fish