

How the FBI Monitored the Occupy Movement

By [Mara Verheyden-Hilliard](#)

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The FBI and other federal agencies coordinated with banks and local authorities in reacting to the Occupy Movement, which was put in the category of a domestic terrorist threat despite the group's advocacy of nonviolence, Dennis J. Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J. Bernstein and Mara Verheyden-Hilliard

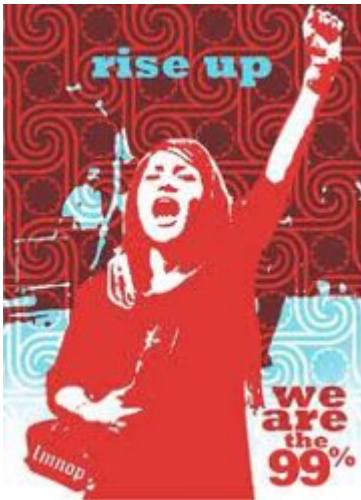
Newly obtained secret FBI documents show that the Feds treated the Occupy Movement as a criminal terrorist threat even though the movement rejected violence as a tactic, a fact that the FBI acknowledges in the files.

Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, the executive director of the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, which obtained the documents, discussed the FBI disclosures in an interview with me on Pacifica Radio's "Flashpoints."

DB: Before we get into some of the specifics talk a little bit about what motivated the request and your initial response to these heavily redacted documents that you did obtain.

MVH: The Partnership for Civil Justice Fund filed a series, or maybe more accurately a barrage of FOI [Freedom of Information] requests in the fall of 2011. At the point at which we could see, and the movement could see, that there was a coordinated crackdown against Occupy happening all over the country.

And we issued FOI demands against federal agencies including the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, the CIA and others, as well as against municipalities and police departments around the country. When we received these documents, which then have taken more than a year to obtain from the FBI, it was very clear to us and clearer, I think, to anyone reading these documents the very intense role that the FBI played in surveillance, mass surveillance operation against the peaceful Occupy Movement.



An Occupy poster, urging protests on behalf of the “99%”

DB: Alright, let’s talk a little bit about the documents that you received, despite the fact that they were blacked out, in many instances. Let’s go through some of the information ... You got a document that was as early as Aug. 19, 2011, and what was the FBI doing? They were getting ready for this movement?

MVH: Yes. It says a lot about the FBI’s conduct in the role of the American intelligence agencies that the FBI, before a single tent was put up in Zuccotti Park in New York, was meeting with the New York Stock Exchange to discuss the plans and upcoming Occupy protests and that was as early as August, 2011. And of course, the OccupyWallStreet started officially on September 17th.

And while, as you said, the documents are heavily redacted and it’s very clear, too, from the redaction that it’s a limited redaction. There’s obviously a lot more out there that we are working to get. That they were working with private entities, as well, meeting with businesses to alert them that they were the focus of protests.

And the documents, throughout, show the FBI, in cities around the country, different field offices, different joint terrorism task force networks communicating with the private banks, private security entities, really themselves acting as a private security arm of corporations, banks and Wall Street.

DB: That’s pretty extraordinary. It really did have the feel that they were working in concert, in conjunction, with some of the major banks. And it was interesting Well, talk a little bit about what happened in terms of Indianapolis and the potential criminal activity alert, whatever that is.

MVH: Right. There’s a potential criminal activity alert put out by the Indianapolis Office of the FBI, even though they are saying that they are aware of the Occupy Movement, they don’t have a date specific for demonstrations or activities in Indiana. But, nonetheless, they are putting out these, you know, warnings, these alerts. Their documents acknowledge that the movement is peaceful.

And it raises these questions, that of course, so many have been asking, you have the FBI granted, you know, mass license since September 11th under the claims of the need for national security, you know, millions, billions of dollars poured into the FBI, Homeland Security and what are they doing?

They are turning their sights on a peaceful social justice movement and doing it at the same time that they are working, hand in hand, with the banks and Wall Street, the very focus of peoples' demonstrations and organizing because of the economic crisis caused by the corporations, banks and Wall Street. And there you have American intelligence agencies acting as their partners.

DB: And we know that the Occupy Movement had a great deal of students involved, young people involved. What did you learn in terms of spying on campuses?

MVH: There's a, the Campus Liaison Project of the FBI has been very controversial. Many student groups, campuses, activists have protested against it, saying that it was, you know, going to be an abusive program. And you have plain evidence of it here. You have evidence in New York, and in Albany, that the FBI was communicating outward to many campuses. The documents reference, at one point, that they were communicating information, and this was all just from the New York location, the 16 campuses, I believe it is, and then there's another six.

And then a representative from SUNI Oswego, from the State University of New York in Oswego communicating information back, reporting to the FBI on the Occupy Movement on campus made up of students and professors. And, you know, in that instance and in many other instances around the country, the documents show this intense collaboration, not just with the banks and Wall Street, but also with state and local law enforcement entities, and the fusion centers.

So here you have this, you know, mass apparatus collecting huge amounts of information, a completely lawful, First Amendment protected — I mean cherished first amendment protected — conduct in the United States and putting it into these completely unregulated, and I think, very dangerous databases and data warehousing centers.

DB: Now were students, were professors employed to be a part of this surveillance. Is there any indication to have students, teachers were paid to surveil?

MVH: I didn't see anything like that. The reference there appears to be a representative, so I am assuming it is someone in the administration or campus police. Not that I think it was someone who was a student, or a professor or something like that. You know, people can go look at the documents, which I really urge people to do there. We made them all publicly available on our web site, which is justiceonline.org.

And, you know, you can read through these documents and see the activities that are going on. There are multiple instances where it appears from the information in the text that is available that there was infiltration and surveillance or undercover operations of that nature going on.

For example, in Richmond, there is discussion where the FBI is conferring with the Federal Reserve, and there is an in-state law enforcement agencies and joint terrorism task force, and there is this reporting going on from these other entities back to the FBI giving them updates on planning meetings and general assembly discussions.

So that certainly raises that specter, and there's another similar incident in Anchorage that we can see where someone whose private security working on behalf of the port in Anchorage, Alaska, is meeting with the FBI over the planned West Coast Occupy port

actions. And saying that they are going to go attend the planning meeting of the protestors and report back.

DB: I guess the thing that I became concerned about, and I covered a number of these police attacks, really, on Occupy movements in New York and in Oakland, where we would see, maybe there's a 130 people in an encampment in Oakland and you'd see 15 police forces converge. And apparently these police forces were being coordinated by the federal government who, I guess, was making deals that if they worked with the federal government they would be able to obtain certain weaponry from the military.

And, of course, there's a concern there when the federal government gets involved in, if you will, community policing, coordinating police departments, bringing police in from other areas. This is sort of walking that, to that border called fascism, when the military and the federal government becomes involved in repression.

MVH: Well, we've certainly seen that trend, and that very shift in police in the United States into a paramilitary policing and our office has litigated, as you know, a number of large cases related to demonstrations and mass demonstrations in the United States. And, you know, in the Occupy context that's really what we're trying to get at is this connection and coordination between the federal government and local police agencies.

And, of course, the federal government always claims that they are completely hands off, and yet these documents are showing this relationship, over and over again. And you have that use of the legal term, imprimatur, that somehow these activities fall under domestic terrorism, I mean, because that's how the FBI is categorizing it and that's just stunning that the FBI is authorized to categorize a social justice movement, peaceful protest, First Amendment, free speech activities as domestic terrorism.

It says something too, that this is happening in this administration. People think if you shift the Democratic, Republican administration that somehow these abuses are not going to occur. But, of course, this is full license to have this type of activity going on under the Obama administration.

You know, let's look at the Tea Party. The Tea Party was having rallies across the United States where they were open carrying [weapons]. They were bringing guns to their rallies, some of them outside of where the President of the United States was speaking but what does the FBI do? They are going after this non-violent, peaceful Occupy Movement.

DB: Say a little bit more about the role of the Domestic Security Alliance Council and what they are doing in the context of surveillance.

MVH: The Domestic Security Alliance Council is this coordinating body between the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and major corporate banking, other interests in the United States. And some of the documents we obtained from the FBI, and one of these documents the Northern California ACLU had also gotten a hold of. When you go through this document, it's very interesting. It shows the relationship between these private entities and the federal government anti-terrorism security forces.

In this document, the one we have which is discussing demonstrations and the port actions there's even this, I think it's a routine kind of footnote that's on the documents where they make the point of saying that everything that's within this entity, this communication should

not be disclosed to the public or to the media. That it's to be kept internally between private corporate entities and the DHS and the FBI.

DB: And is there, in terms of the FBI and these federal agencies working with corporate institutions like banks and like working with the Federal Reserve, what's the problem there?

MVH: Well, I think we would all accept that, you know, having U.S. government intelligence agencies acting as private security with corporations, with banks, with Wall Street which, you know, in these instances also are the very entities, that are the focus of peoples' social justice activism, and their attempts to change the status quo in the United States - is that what your billions of tax dollars are supposed to be going to do? Is that what's supposed to happen in a democracy? Of course not. It is the negation of democracy to have the government acting arm in arm with corporations, and banks, and Wall Street, against the people of the United States.

And that's exactly what's happening here. I think for most people in the movement this doesn't come as a shock but the fact that it's being so plainly revealed here, and that the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security don't even feel that they have to explain it, apologize it or say it's a mistake or an anomaly. It's enshrined in what they are doing.

DB: And speaking about what they were doing ... what was the Jackson, Mississippi, Joint Terrorism Task Force doing when they issued a counter terrorism preparedness alert, whatever that is?

MVH: Well, there are throughout the documents repeated references to domestic terrorism, counter-terrorism alerts. You have the FBI joint terrorism task forces meeting in like Biloxi with all these private banks to discuss an upcoming demonstration that they'd heard about where people were protesting that it was "bad bank sit-in day." And yet here they are meeting with all these banks privately.

One of the documents that we have has the FBI domestic terrorism discussions referencing three groups, in essence, in domestic terrorism capacity and that would be the Arian Nation, Occupy and Anonymous. Which says a lot about the FBI's perspective on social justice organizing that they can just lay that side by side with racist, violent, terrorist organizations, like the Arian Nation.

DB: And as you say the Tea Party is coming, openly, to their meetings with weaponry, I guess they are following the laws of the states that they are in. But it would seem to me that that would require some attention.

Before I let you go, I want to ask you what you think the significance is of what you found, and what you plan to do with the information. Do you plan to keep pushing forward given the fact that so much of this was redacted, or blacked out?

MVH: Yes, we're filing an appeal. We're challenging the redactions. We're also challenging the scope of production. We believe there's a lot more information, when you read the text of the document it's plain that there is a lot more information that was being gathered, collected, meetings, memos that we don't have, and we intend to get.

And the point of this and why we undertook this project, we have these materials from the FBI, we have other materials from The Department of Homeland Security, other materials from local police departments, and we've made them all available and searchable on our

web site.

The point of doing this is because the people of the United States have the right to control the intelligence agencies and these kinds of government activities. They have the right to stop it. But first you have to know about it. And so long as the government can act under this cloak of secrecy, in the dark, they are going to continue to get away with these actions.

But exposure is the first necessary step to trying to halt and bring an end to this extremity and these abuses. We want to make them available to the public because people need to actually see what's happening and be able to take action.

DB: Alright and if people again want to get more information about the work that you're doing over at the Partnership for Civil Justice, how do they do that?

MVH: Please come to our web site. It is justiceonline.org. And on that site you can see all of these documents that we're getting, we're continuing to get more regularly. And as we get them, we are posting them. And you can sign up for breaking news alerts so that as soon as we get material we send out e-mail alerts letting people know as the documents become available.

DB: Beautiful. Well, I want to thank you very much Mara Verheyden-Hilliard executive director of the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, trying to get documentation from the federal government, from the FBI in terms of potentially actions of illegal surveillance of Occupy actions in New York City and around the country. Thanks for being with us on Flashpoints. Have a happy holiday.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net. You can get in touch with the author at dbernstein@igc.org.

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