

Fifth Estate Opens Red Squad Files

Fifth Estate Collective

Seventeen years after a lawsuit begun by social activists, including this newspaper, against the Detroit Police Red Squad, the sordid episode of cop spying has almost come to its climax. During its 50-year history of dogging radicals, peeping over transoms, paying informers and keeping the most excruciatingly detailed list of license plate numbers taken from cars at radical gatherings, the gumshoes managed to amass over one million names in their files.

A 1974 court decision held such cop activity to be unconstitutional bringing an official end to the Red Squad (although almost everyone in the radical movement believes it continues today but in a more streamlined fashion). The court also ordered that the files be made available to those who were spied upon, but the distribution of files was completed only this year (see FE #334, Summer 1990).

Although the cops previously disposed of many of the “big time” files of the mayor and prominent liberal and labor personalities, at least 4,000 persons requested and received their dossiers. A number of FE staff members got their files, but found nothing tremendously shocking. It is clear from reading the Fifth Estate file, however, that a paid informer was active among our staff, but that was something we knew long ago.

We also obtained files from several of the organizations in which we were active and are willing to make available for people to read. We have ones from the Fifth Estate, the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the Detroit Draft Resistance Movement, and the Detroit High School Student Mobilization Committee. So, if you were around during that period and want a chronicle of how the cops were tailing us, or a current activist and want to read about that era from the perspective of the cops, give us a call at the FE office and we'll set up a time when you can view the documents.

As this is written, the City is now insisting that all of the files be destroyed (a belated concern about “confidentiality”), whereas the activist plaintiffs want the court to place them in a library archive to document police abuse and as a history of the period. A court ruling is pending.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/338-winter-1992/fifth-estate-opens-red-squad-files>

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