



GOVERNMENT

MI5 had undercover police report on construction worker

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The British secret service held information gathered by undercover police on a bricklayer and trade union activist dubbed "Britain's most blacklisted worker", it has emerged. MI5 received a report on a 1986 meeting of the left-wing protest group known as Red Action where Brian Higgins spoke about industrial action against contractor John Laing.

Higgins was a trade unionist and leading fighter against blacklisting in the construction sector.

The secret report (which is accessible [here](#)) was previously subject to a restriction order, but the Undercover Policing Inquiry has now released it to the public for the first time.

The document reveals that an undercover police officer – known as "Nicholas Green" – reported on the Red Action meeting where Higgins spoke about a protest against John Laing. John Laing sold its construction firm to O'Rourke Construction in 2001 (which became Laing O'Rourke), but still operates as an infrastructure investor.

Green's report – signed off by a then chief superintendent of the Metropolitan Police – is stamped with Box 500, a colloquial term for MI5 as its address was PO Box 500 during the Second World War.

The dispute

Higgins was a bricklayer and member of the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) and of the left-wing Revolutionary Democratic Group.

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The dispute with John Laing focused on the contractor's use of the controversial 'lump sum' payment structure, which involved hiring workers on a per-job basis rather than a day rate.

This meant they were not entitled to any sick pay, holiday pay or pension, according to a study into disputes in the construction industry published in 2013.

That paper said that the lump sum system "incentivised workers to finish their work as quickly as possible, and often took little interest in health and safety considerations, site conditions or the training of apprentices".

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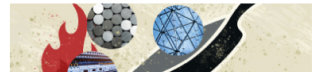
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The inquiry has not released Nicholas Green's real name as he has since passed away.

But he was a member of the Metropolitan Police's Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), set up in 1968 to gather intelligence from protest groups capable of "causing serious public disorder", the Metropolitan Police said in a statement sent to *Construction News*.

The SDS was disbanded in 2008.

The main protest against John Laing took place at a construction site in Surbiton, south London.

But UCATT had successfully expanded its protest to other sites, and was receiving "tacit support" from the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), the document reveals.

The TGWU represented drivers who were delivering concrete and steel to John Laing's sites.

During the meeting, on 4 March, 1986, Higgins is quoted as thanking Red Action members for supporting the strike, but also warning that wider support was becoming "difficult to sustain".

A High Court injunction had limited the protest to Surbiton, which led to the TGWU withdrawing its support for the picket lines, Green reported.

Higgins told the meeting that a committee on the protest would call for a mass picket at a John Laing site in London Bridge to force the issue, despite the High Court decision.

If arrested, the protesters would likely be imprisoned as they had no money to pay any fines, he argued, which would either force UCATT to respond to popular support for the protesters or force John Laing to reinstate the workers to "save further expense and embarrassment".

Green filed his report on 11 March 1986.

The TGWU merged with Amicus to form the Unite union in 2007, and UCATT also became part of Unite in 2016.

'Unjustified' tactics

In his interim report following tranche one of the Undercover Policing Inquiry, published last June, inquiry chair Sir John Mitting said the use of undercover tactics was unjustified.

He said that the SDS would have "been brought to a rapid end" much earlier if its methods were more widely known.

Though he accepted undercover policing could have been justified if "its purpose was to prevent or investigate serious crime, including terrorism and activities akin to it to", he found just three of the groups surveilled by the SDS met those requirements.

He found that undercover officers used the identities of deceased children, while many befriended members of their target groups during their work, and in some cases had sexual relationships with them.

Sir John also criticised the Home Office and Metropolitan Police for continuing to grant funding to the SDS on an annual basis, despite concerns over its tactics.

Campaigners are now calling for all documents gathered by the inquiry on undercover policing – sometimes referred to as the Spycops Inquiry – to be made available to the public.

Dave Smith, former branch secretary at UCATT, and a core participant in the inquiry, said undercover policing "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," he added.

"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."

Nicholas Green is the latest undercover policeman revealed to have collected information on union activists in the construction sector.

In 2018, the inquiry confirmed media reports that undercover policeman 'Mark Cassidy', whose real name was Mark Jenner, had infiltrated UCATT in the 1990s.

The police force declined to comment on the Nicholas Green case specifically, as the inquiry is ongoing.

But its deputy assistant commissioner Jon Savell said it "fully supports the aims of the inquiry" and will offer "every assistance so it has access to all the information and material it needs".



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"I want to make clear that undercover policing has undergone significant reform over the decades since this happened.

"Today it is a practice underpinned by strong governance and oversight, and with clear ethical guidelines and a legislative framework," he added.

"We are committed to being as open and transparent as possible in this very sensitive and complex area of policing and we pledge to use each stage of the inquiry as an opportunity to reflect on how to learn and improve further."

M15 does not have a press office, and all their media requests are directed to the Home Office.

The Home Office declined to comment.

Laing O'Rourke and John Laing also declined to comment.

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