

TIP SHEET for staff organizers

Common Sense Security

by Sheila O'Donnell

As the movements for social change become more sophisticated, the techniques of the state, corporations and the right wing have also become more sophisticated. Historically this has always been the case; we will continue and will be the eventual victors. Caution in the face of the concerted effort to stop us, however, is both prudent and necessary.

Here are some useful suggestions:

- If you wish to have a private conversation, leave your home and your office and go outside and take a walk or go somewhere public and notice who is near you. Never say anything you don't want to hear repeated when there is any possibility of being recorded.
- Never leave one copy of a document or list behind; take a minute to duplicate an irreplaceable document and keep the duplicate in a safe place. Back up and store important computer disks off-site. Sensitive data and membership list should be kept under lock and key.
- Keep your mailing lists, donor lists and personal phone books away from light-fingered people. Always maintain a duplicate.
- Know your printer if you are about to publish.
- Know your mailing house.
- Know anyone you are trusting to work on any part of a project that is sensitive.
- Don't hire a stranger as a messenger.
- Sweeps for electronic surveillance are only effective for the time they are being done, and are only effective as they are being done if you are sure of the person(s) doing the sweep.
- Don't use code on the phone. If you are being tapped and the transcript is used against you in court, the coded conversations can be alleged to be anything. Don't say anything on the phone you don't want to hear in open court.
- Don't gossip on the phone. Smut is valuable to anyone listening; it makes everyone vulnerable.
- If you are being followed, get the tag number and description of the car and people in the car. Photograph the person(s) following you or have a friend do so.
- If you are followed or feel vulnerable, call a friend; don't "tough it out" alone. They are trying to frighten you. It is frightening to have someone threatening your freedom.
- Debrief yourself after each incident. Write details down: time, date, occasion, incident, characteristics of the person(s), impressions, anything odd about the situation. Keep a "weirdo" file and keep notes from unsettling situations and see if a pattern emerges.
- Write for your file under the FOIA and pursue the agencies until they give you all the documents filed under your name.
- Brief your membership on known or suspected surveillance.
- Report thefts of materials from your office or home to the police as a criminal act.
- Assess your undertaking from a security point of view; understand your vulnerabilities; assess your allies and your adversaries as objectively as possible; do not underestimate the opposition. Do not take chances.
- Recognize your organizational and personal strengths and weaknesses.
- Discuss incidents with cohorts, family and membership. Call the press if you have hard information about surveillance or harassment. Discussion makes the dirty work of the intelligence agencies and private spies overt.

Visits from the FBI

- Don't talk to the FBI (or any government investigator) without your attorney present. Information gleaned during the visit can be used against you and your co-workers. Get the names and addresses of the agents and tell them you will have your attorney get in touch with them. They rarely set up an interview under those circumstances.
- Don't invite them into your home. Speak with the agents outside. Once inside, they glean information about your perspective and life style.
- Don't let them threaten you into talking. If the FBI intends to empanel a grand jury, a private talk with you will not change the strategy of the FBI.
- *Lying to the FBI is a criminal act.* Any information you give the FBI can and will be used against you.
- Don't let them intimidate you. So what if they know where you live or work and what you do? This is still a democracy and we still have Constitutional rights. They intend to frighten you; don't let them. They can only "neutralize" you if you let them.
- *Remember:* The United States prides itself in being a democracy; we have Constitutional rights. Disatisfaction with the *status quo* and attempting to mobilize for change is protected; surveillance and harassment are violations. Speak out.

Sheila O'Donnell, a Maryland-based investigator with more than a decade's experience on civil liberties cases, is a co-founder of the Public Eye Magazine.