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Anarchist probe: Jailed activists say they won't talk to...

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Anarchists targeted after Seattle's violent May Day protests

Three activists are in federal custody because they won't talk. The secretive investigation has raised alarm among civil rights advocates.

October 19, 2012 | By Kim Murphy, Los Angeles Times

SEATTLE — Early on the morning of July 25, residents of a neighborhood in northeast Portland, Ore., were awakened by the sound of a battering ram plowing through the front door of a small house. Inside, the sleepy young occupants stumbled out of bed as FBI agents rushed in with assault rifles.

Leah-Lynn Plante, a thin, tattooed woman who volunteers at a bookstore that specializes in anarchist literature, shivered in her underwear in the backyard as a SWAT team hauled out computers, clothing, books and artwork — looking, the agents said, for evidence of who participated in this year's May Day demonstrations in Seattle that saw smashed windows at banks and clashes with the police.

What bothered Plante was that they weren't just looking for sticks and black masks. The FBI search warrant also listed "anarchist" and "anti-government" literature and material among items to be seized.

"It was like something out of George Orwell's '1984.' It was absolutely horrendous," Plante, 24, said shortly before she was taken into custody Oct. 10 for failing to testify before a federal grand jury in Seattle about her friends in the anarchist movement.



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Plante is one of three activists being held at the Federal Detention Center near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in an investigation of anarchists in the Pacific Northwest that has led to subpoenas in Seattle, Olympia and Portland. The secretive probe has raised alarm among civil rights advocates who say witnesses are being asked to answer questions not only about their own activities May 1 — Plante says she wasn't even in Seattle — but what they know about certain groups or organizations.

The investigation in Seattle is one of several across the U.S. targeting anarchists. Last month, three self-described anarchists pleaded guilty to plotting to blow up a bridge south of Cleveland. Three purported anarchists were arrested in Chicago in May and accused of conspiring to burn down buildings with Molotov cocktails during the NATO summit there.

One person, caught on camera, has pleaded guilty to bashing the door of the federal appeals courthouse in Seattle on May Day, an incident that elevated at least that part of the mayhem to a federal crime. Authorities said they are investigating whether anyone crossed state lines to riot — also a violation of federal law.

The FBI, citing the secrecy of the grand jury process, has declined to discuss the Seattle investigation, though an affidavit mistakenly released to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer suggested that several Portland activists were monitored as they traveled to Olympia just before the May Day demonstrations. It said text

messages monitored by federal authorities established that they were among the black-clad protesters who damaged a federal courthouse and clashed with police that day.

Anarchism as a political philosophy has deep roots in the Pacific Northwest, and that's one of the problems, civil rights advocates say: Many people who might never attack a courthouse may hand out pamphlets and attend meetings that call for upending the nation's system of money and power.

"Anytime the federal government is sending federal security officers into people's homes looking for anti-government literature, that raises all sorts of red flags," said Neil Fox, president of the Seattle chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, which has helped provide attorneys for those called in for questioning.

Authorities say they have long had trouble monitoring protest movements such as Occupy, which attract primarily peaceful demonstrators, but may include radical activists — the kind who don black clothing and cover their faces to attack banks, shops and other perceived symbols of capitalist excess.

"We can use the example in L.A. [The Occupy protest] started off being peaceful demonstrators exercising their 1st Amendment rights, and it was not a problem. But they stayed here [City Hall] 59 days, and over time, you could see the criminal element come into the movement, and it began to degrade very fast," said Michael Downing, head of the Los Angeles Police Department's counter-terrorism and criminal intelligence bureau.

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"We saw anarchists, drug dealers, we saw weapons being moved in, rebar, bamboo pipes. It created an environment where people who really wanted to stay and exercise their rights weren't able to because it became unsafe," he said.

Back in Seattle, detained along with Plante are two activists from Olympia, Wash., who also refused to testify: Matthew Duran, 24, a computer technician, and his roommate, Katherine Olejnik, 23, a bartender.

Letters of support have flooded in to all three, and appeals urging their release have multiplied across the Internet. Duran, who grew up in Southern California advocating for the rights of migrant workers, said he had heard from people as far away as France and Italy since he went into custody Sept. 13.

Olejnik, arrested in 2007 and 2008 at the ports of Olympia and Tacoma for trying to blockade war equipment bound for Iraq, said federal prosecutors who questioned her seemed to be trying to identify networks, not crimes.

"They weren't trying to figure out from me who did a certain thing. They wanted to know who knew who, who was connected to who," said Olejnik, who has been held since Sept. 27. "They're asking us who believes in things."

Emily Langlie, a spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in Seattle, which is coordinating the grand jury probe, said the order to incarcerate the three was merely an attempt, under civil contempt proceedings, to compel them to answer questions they are required by law to answer.

"It's not punitive," she said. "It's coercive."

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