

Blacklisted

The Secret War between Big Business and Union Activists

Dave Smith and Phil Chamberlain

One of the co-authors, Phil Chamberlain, wrote an early sketch of this material in *Lobster* 58 (which is on-line ¹) and the subtitle of that piece, 'How the Economic League lived on' might have been the subtitle title of this book.

When the League formally closed in 1993 (or 1994; reports vary) their monitoring of the left and the unions for companies was taken up by a little organisation called Caprim, with a couple of ex-League employees at the helm,² and by The Consulting Association (TCA). While Caprim did research into left/environmental campaigns which might impinge on companies, The Consulting Association was focused specifically on the 'threat' of union activities in the construction industry and was essentially the League's unit in that field under a new name. Caprim was exposed in 2000 but TCA remained a secret until 2009 – when Chamberlain began writing about it.

This book is that *Lobster* essay by Chamberlain massively expanded to include:

- * subsequent parliamentary and legal activities concerning TCA;
- * accounts of many of those affected by the blacklist which TCA was operating;
- * the campaign by unions against TCA;
- * analysis of the files exposed by the legal action against TCA;
- * historical analysis to place TCA in context;
- * accounts of the other forms of left/union monitoring conducted by the state, notably the Met's undercover unit, the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS).

The one area which is still fuzzy is the relationship between groups such as TCA and the police and security services. There are fragments suggesting that there was such a relationship but the evidence is thin.

1 <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/issue58.php>>

2 <<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2000/sep/09/emu.theeuro>>

There are hints that there are other companies doing this vetting/research for companies – Kroll and Control Risks for example; but for the construction industry TCA did seem to be the place. Why were the building firms so keen on it? This may simply be an aspect of the intense competition for big construction contracts. The TCA files that were exposed – and most were not – showed that the companies were centrally concerned to avoid hiring union members who might try to improve the safety culture on sites. Building work is intrinsically dangerous; many are killed and injured. Improving safety regimes means working more carefully and slowly, and this increases labour costs. The picture that emerges of the construction industry in the UK in recent years is that of ruthless companies, for whom injuries to and deaths of casual, frequently subcontracted staff are merely part of the costs of doing business. Welcome to one of the down sides of competition – the race to the bottom.

This is a significant book, nicely produced, thoroughly documented and well written. It is also a good news book – the unions won a partial victory – and there are few good news tales in the fields *Lobster* covers. Recommended.

Robin Ramsay