

Redwatch Action at last?

By Nick Lowles

AFTER ALMOST THREE years of campaigning by Searchlight and others it appears that the government is finally beginning to address the matter of the Redwatch website. A Home Office minister has been tasked to look at the possibility of taking action against those behind the site and even closing it down, despite the fact that it is hosted in the United States.

The decision comes at the same time as arrests of people connected with the Polish version of Redwatch.

It was in autumn 2003 that Searchlight identified the people behind the Redwatch site. We reproduced emails that circulated among the organisers in which they gathered intelligence on their opponents, planned attacks and even passed on bomb manuals.

The emails revealed that the purpose of the Redwatch site was to intimidate and harass opponents of the extreme right with the aim of silencing them.

The government's belated interest in Redwatch comes after Alec McFadden, president of Merseyside Trades Council, was almost blinded after being attacked on his doorstep in May. If he had not had been able to close the door so quickly after being slashed across the face with a knife, his injuries could have been fatal.

Mr McFadden's home address had been posted on Redwatch.

His case was taken up by his local MP Angela Eagle. A debate on an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons was followed by lobbying of the Home Office.

"I'm confident that we are going to see movement over Redwatch," Ms Eagle told Searchlight.

"We must take these websites down. They are a way of spreading intimidation through political violence. It is classic fascist tactics dressed up in a new way."

Ms Eagle is pushing for a more robust Home Office line on Redwatch and other hate sites. She believes that the police need to take the general issue more seriously and be prepared to take more preventative action.

"These sites should be treated in the

same way as paedophile sites," she argues.

The publicity surrounding the attack on Mr McFadden, who has been at the forefront of fighting the British National Party for several years and more recently has been involved in the campaign following the racist murder of Anthony Walker, appears to have galvanised those behind Redwatch. The site was updated in June for the first time in several months.

Interestingly enough, some of the newer information posted on the site was about other people in Merseyside. One of the targets was Robbie Quinn, a Liberal Democrat councillor, who began receiving threatening phone calls shortly after his details appeared on the site.

"The call came at about 7am," he told the *Liverpool Daily Post*. "If someone phones you at that time in the morning, you think that something is wrong with your family."

"I answered it and a man's voice began speaking. He made a number of offensive, racist comments before telling me that he knew where I lived and that he would come and shoot me and my family."

His details appeared on Redwatch after he was filmed delivering anti-BNP leaflets.

Alun Perry, the Merseyside singer, became another new target of Redwatch after he performed at a refugee benefit concert. "I am just a singer, I am not a political activist in any way," he told the press.

"At first I was terrified and wanted to hide away. But then I thought the only way to handle this is to stand up and be counted. There are more good people out there than bad people."

Ms Eagle's details have also now been posted on the site. She is undeterred and is leading a delegation, which will include the TUC, to talk with Vernon Coker, the minister responsible for tackling internet crime. Also backing the campaign is Cllr Warren Bradley, leader of Liverpool Council.

In a separate move, Searchlight has provided the authorities with a detailed dossier on the people behind Redwatch.

Polish arrests

The British authorities would do well to look at developments in Poland where three people have been arrested for their involvement in the Polish Redwatch site after a number of people whose details appeared on the site were violently attacked.

One victim was a leftwing activist who was tear-gassed and then stabbed in the back. A 37-year-old man was arrested and charged with inciting racial hatred, violating laws for the protection of personal data and involvement in an organised criminal group. Police allege that he updated the Redwatch site.

A second man was arrested a few days later and an inspection of his computer confirmed that he maintained the Redwatch site. The police action followed a campaign by the anti-fascist organisation Never Again.

The Polish authorities then contacted the FBI and requested assistance in closing down the Redwatch site. Like its British counterpart, the Polish Redwatch site is hosted in the US where the organisers believe they have protection under the freedom of speech laws.

The Redwatch site was shut down but has since been restored, this time from Dallas, Texas.

The Polish arrests show what is possible when the authorities are moved to act. In Britain they have failed to do so for several years and, shamefully, it took someone almost to be killed for action to be considered.

Experience has shown that pressure will need to be maintained. Tightening internet regulation is one thing but taking action against those behind Redwatch is what is needed, as well as demands for the US authorities to shut down the Redwatch sites. ◀

Join Searchlight's campaign to have Redwatch shut down and for those responsible to be prosecuted, by signing our online letter to the Home Secretary at www.stopthebnp.org.uk