

Still Watching

Private industry moves in to compile personal data

By Dave Lindorff

Coming soon to a law enforcement department near you: The Matrix, Loaded.

Not the movie—something far more disturbing: the Multistate Anti-Terrorism Information Exchange.

In reaction to public outrage, Congress cancelled funding for retired Adm. John Poindexter's so-called Total Information Awareness (TIA) project at the Pentagon—even though the “T” was later changed to the more acceptable “Terrorism.” But it turns out that a group of 13 states, spearheaded by Florida, have been working with a private company to develop a similar system designed to put everyone's records at police fingertips.

Matrix—developed with a \$12 million federal grant—was designed by Seisint Inc., which previously used its data-mining software to help insurance companies detect fraud.

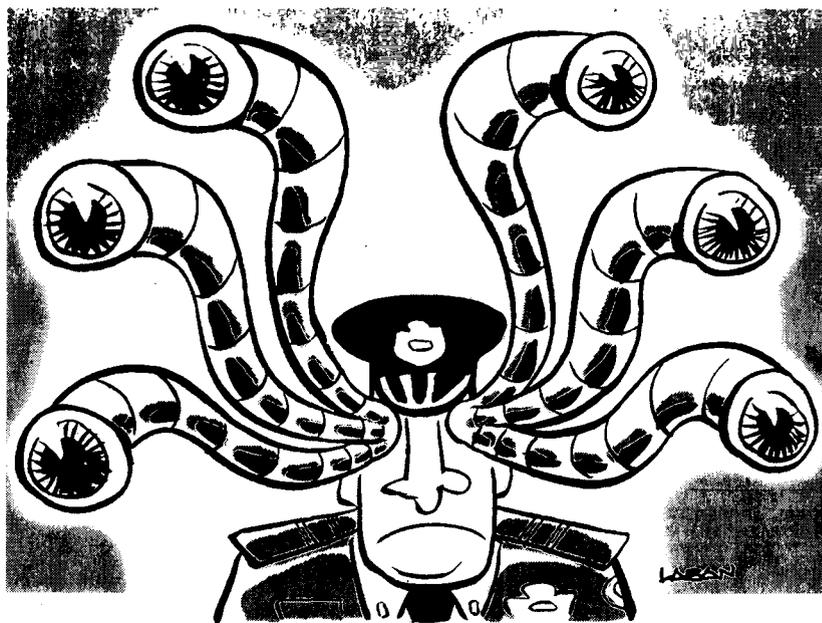
For the last year and a half, Florida's state police have been using Seisint's system to search information at the touch of a keypad: drivers licenses, car registrations, criminal records, child abuse records and corrections records—as well as “publicly available” financial records. Another dozen states, including Georgia, New York and Pennsylvania, will buy into the system, giving police access to all of the other members' records. Several states, including Texas and California, declined to participate, citing concerns about the security of the data being collected and accessed.

The ACLU, alarmed at what it sees as a state end run around congressional de-funding of Poindexter's project, filed freedom of

information requests October 30 for details of Matrix with all participating states

“This is a very scary development,” says Barry Steinhardt, director of the ACLU's Technology and Liberty Program. “This Matrix system means you can search information on hundreds of millions of people. Law-abiding Americans are going to pay the price for letting law enforcement troll all their data this way.”

Like TIA, Matrix backers say the system is simply another tool in the battle against terror. But it will play little part in that effort, which is largely a federal government job. Rather, Matrix will be used in run-of-the-mill law enforcement.



“I won't lie to you,” says Lt. Col. Ralph Periandi, deputy commissioner for operations with the Pennsylvania State Police. “This system is not just being used to investigate terrorism.”

Concerns about possible misuse of data were aroused when it was discovered that the designer of the system, Hank Asher, was an unindicted co-conspirator in a \$150-million cocaine smuggling ring. Asher resigned from the Seisint board last August.

Periandi serves as a member of the policy board developing Matrix and says with Asher gone there are no problems. “All of the Seisint people who will have access to the data will be vetted,” Periandi says. The system also will include tight controls over access, he continues, and a clear audit trail

to follow in case of misuse.

But what about concerns that the system could lead to a world in which police monitor everyone? In response, Periandi laughs: “I guess it comes down to whether you trust the police or not.”

Given the record of police spying and misuse of intelligence data over the recent decades, most recently in Denver and Philadelphia, such a remark is not encouraging. Nor are reports that the Matrix consortium is considering giving access to the data to the CIA, which ordinarily is not supposed to spy on Americans within the United States.

Periandi argues that Matrix doesn't give police new powers or access to additional data. “We can access all this information already,” he says. The difference: Getting it today requires making separate searches through individual databases in each of the 50 states. “With Matrix we can do it in 10 minutes,” he says.

But the ACLU's Steinhardt replies that this is just the problem. “Before, investigators had to have a reason to track the information on one suspect,” he says. “Now they can do data-mining and search for associations among all citizens, based upon certain assumptions.”

Periandi provided a perfect example of such assumptions by suggesting that searches could examine how “serial killers tend to use all three of their names, like John Wilkes Booth.” But he disavows the term “data-mining.” Although it is widely used in modern industry, he says, police authorities prefer the term “database integration.”

“I think you'll find that with a project as Orwellian as this, these government agencies will engage in the Orwellian practice of trying to rename things,” says Steinhardt. “But whatever you call it, it means the police using Matrix will be able to monitor the activities of all the citizens in their states—and that's frightening.” ■

Dave Lindorff is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

Health Scare

Medicare privatization debate reaches boiling point

By Kip Sullivan

A crucial debate in Congress on whether to privatize Medicare is rapidly coming to a head. As *In These Times* went to press, Republican congressional leaders had reportedly instructed Republicans on a House-Senate conference committee to decide by November 10 whether to endorse the provisions of a House bill that would privatize Medicare in 2010.

Republicans are under intense pressure to add Medicare drug coverage, however meager, to soften the GOP's image as the party of the rich, and those on the conference committee are being pressured by the right wing to endorse HR 1's privatization provisions.

Democrats have warned, however, that retaining privatization could doom the

bill. On October 23, 41 senators, including one Republican and an independent, warned Bush not to pursue privatization. Democrats have expedient reasons to play hardball: Medicare drug benefits are popular among voters; privatization is not. Republicans could suffer voter retribution in 2004 if they sacrifice drug coverage.

The outcome of this debate will have a long-lasting influence on the entire U.S. health-care system, not just Medicare. Conservatives are acutely aware of this fact. In a June 23 op-ed, *Wall Street Journal* editors warned Republicans not to decouple privatization and drug coverage. If they did, the piece argued, "Republicans will have already spent their one reform carrot of a prescription drug benefit, private Medicare delivery will be discredited, and the baby boomers will start retiring, increasing the constituency against change." Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, lamented to the *New York Times*, "If we don't get this right, we're going to get European-style socialism in this country in order to finance the

exploding costs of this program when the baby boomers retire."

Ryan is talking trash when he says unprivatized Medicare amounts to socialism, but he is right to suggest that the program and the 40 million it insures resembles single-payer systems in which one tax-financed public agency sets limits on how much providers can charge and reimburses doctors and hospitals directly.

The presence of the traditional Medicare model on the American landscape makes it easier for single-payer advocates to explain how a single-payer system for all Americans would work and why it is superior to the private sector's multiple-payer system. Indeed, in the last five years many single-payer advocates have called their proposal "Medicare for all." Losing traditional Medicare would delay creation of a single-payer system here.

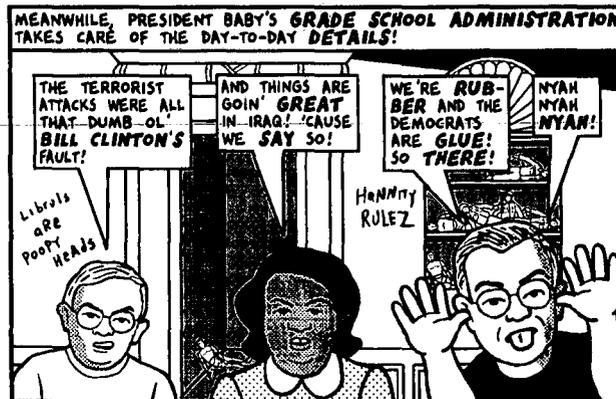
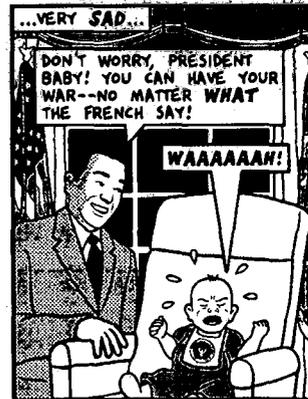
Democrats have done little to promote single-payer but most understand that privatizing Medicare would be a disaster. All evidence indicates that pushing seniors out of Medicare into HMOs would raise, not lower, costs, and would damage quality of care.

HR 1 would achieve privatization in stages by putting great financial pressure on seniors to leave traditional Medicare and enroll in HMOs. Under HR 1, Medicare's guarantee of medical services would be replaced with a voucher that seniors would use to purchase coverage from either the traditional Medicare program (which would have to start charging a premium in 2010) or an HMO. Because sicker seniors would be more likely to stay in traditional Medicare, which neither limits choice of doctor nor interferes in the doctor-patient relation as HMOs do, the Medicare premiums would be higher than those of the HMOs. This would set off a "death spiral": Higher premiums would drive even more disproportionately healthy seniors out of traditional Medicare, Medicare would thereby be forced to charge even higher premiums, and the program eventually would "wither on the vine," in the immortal words of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Rep. William Thomas (R-Calif) chief architect of HR 1, was not exaggerating when he told MSNBC in June that he expected HR 1 to "end Medicare as we know it."

Kip Sullivan has written about and organized for universal health care since 1986.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



No Pepperoni, Please

Tyson workers and community demand more than 'chicken feed'

By Ricky Baldwin

Visitors passing through Wisconsin on their way to Madison or Milwaukee might happen into a dense forest of billboards and yard signs called Jefferson. This farmland town of less than 8,000 is up in arms, fighting off a corporate assault that threatens its existence. And it's not just one town. The corporate giant in this story has taken aim at workers in an entire industry—and by extension hundreds of communities nationwide.

Ground zero is Jefferson's pork processing plant, which produces 65 million pounds of pepperoni a year, more than half the pepperoni used on Pizza Hut and Kraft pizzas. Like other workers in the heavily unionized beef and pork processing industry, and unlike poultry processing workers, generations of employees at the Jefferson plant have enjoyed relatively good wages and benefits—and never had to strike in the plant's 124-year history, until now.

"Tyson is trying to make more money by taking away our wages, taking away affordable health care and taking us away from our children," says Lisa Dehnert, an employee at the Jefferson plant for 16 years and a single mom.

At issue in Jefferson is starting pay, vacation time, health and other benefits, all of which new plant owner Tyson Foods proposes to cut, as well as chopping off the pension in favor of a 401(k) plan heavily invested in Tyson stock, Enron-style.

But workers at dozens of beef and pork processing plants across the country see Jefferson's fight as just the beginning. "We can have the fight now in Jefferson," says one Oscar Mayer employee in Madison, "or down the road at our plant later."

Tyson Foods, by far the largest poultry processor in the world, moved into beef and pork in 2001 with its purchase of IBP Fresh Meats, formerly Iowa Beef Process-

ing. A federal lawsuit had prevented the nation's biggest pork processor, Smithfield Foods, from buying IBP because of antitrust concerns. Tyson had reached its own limit in poultry and quickly swooped down on IBP, including the Jefferson plant. Jefferson workers say they saw the writing on the wall right away.

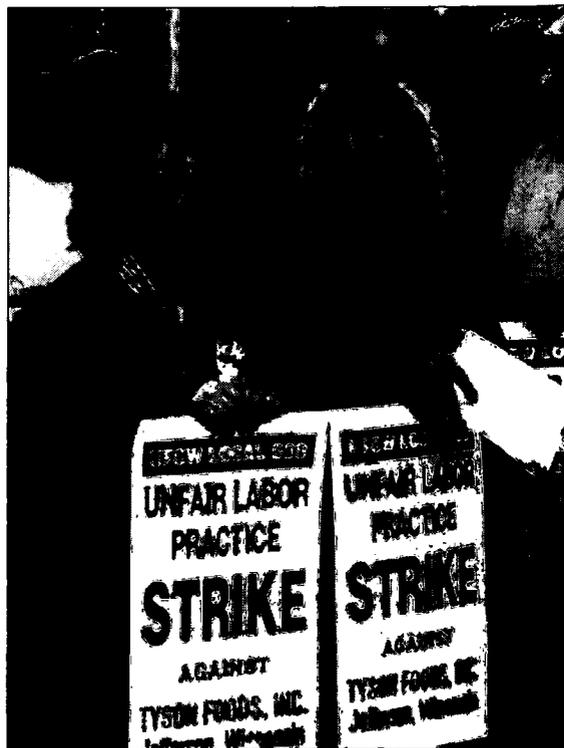
"It was the saddest day of my life," says union president Mike Rice.

The strikers are members of United Food and Commercial Workers, the same union that has fought Tyson elsewhere. They are well aware of Tyson's record of hoarding profits—more than \$2.23 billion last year alone—while workers endure low pay and rising safety violations. In 1999, seven Tyson employees were killed at work, including two who fell into an open pit of decomposing chicken parts and suffocated. The same year in Corydon, Indiana, Tyson employees went on strike after several workers were disciplined for discarding diseased meat.

So when Tyson informed union negotiators in Jefferson last fall that the company planned to bring them into line with their other operations, workers knew they had to fight.

They walked out in February 2003, when their last contract extension expired, calling a national boycott of Tyson-made pepperoni. The community responded immediately. Passersby stopped at the picket line to hand out coffee and donuts. A local pharmacist donated free milk to children of strikers. Local supermarkets pulled Tyson products off the shelves. Nearby city councils and school boards voted to stop buying Tyson products in their cafeterias and lunchrooms.

Nine months later, community support has heightened, and donations are pouring in from all over the United States. Only five of the 470 union members have crossed the picket line. Even a recent funeral in Jefferson became a kind of proxy picket line when the siblings of the deceased, an ardent union activist named Mike Barkley, stood up and announced that they were donating what they would



On September 28, workers' families took part in a protest rally against Tyson Corp.

have spent on their brother at Christmas to the local strike fund.

"People make movies and write books about stuff like this," says union spokesman Dick Knapp.

But what makes a community mobilize like this on behalf of a small group of workers? What makes strangers around the country dig deep to help a little town in Wisconsin? And why would a group of workers endure the hardship—living hand to mouth on donated canned goods, many now without health insurance—over changes that, as the company points out, "primarily affect new hires"?

Partly, the strikers say, it's because a family of four cannot live on \$9 an hour without becoming "a burden on the state." Partly, they say, it's because increasing numbers of workers face a similar threat. But mostly, Knapp says, "It's about community."

For more information, please see www.tysonfamiliesstandup.org. ■

Ricky Baldwin is a longtime labor activist and writer whose articles have appeared in such publications as *Dollars & Sense*, *Extra!* and *Z Magazine*.

Boiling Oil

ChevronTexaco faces Ecuador's courts

By Lou Dematteis and Suzana Sawyer

LAGO AGRIO, ECUADOR—High-level corporate lawyers from ChevronTexaco sat in the same packed muggy courtroom as bare-breasted Amazonian men and women on October 21, the start of what the national media referred to as The Trial of the Century. In this ramshackle Amazonian town, ChevronTexaco stands accused of severely contaminating the surrounding region during 20 years of oil drilling and production in what once was untouched rainforest with pristine rivers and lakes.

At stake is not only whether the San Ramon-based corporate giant will have

to pay more than \$1 billion to clean up pollution left behind by its oil production from 1972 to 1992, but whether the case will bring fundamental change to the way U.S. corporations do business around the world.

The case already has set precedent. It was first filed in the United States in 1993 on behalf of 30,000 plaintiffs in the Ecuadorean Amazon for environmental and health damages but bounced around until a federal appeals court dismissed it nine years later. As part of the dismissal, the court sent the case to Ecuador under the condition that ChevronTexaco abide by the Ecuadorean court's ruling. "The case is historic," said Steven Donziger, a U.S. lawyer representing the Ecuadorean plaintiffs. "This is the first time a U.S. oil company has been forced to submit to jurisdiction in a Latin American court in an environmental case with damages of this magnitude."

No one is denying that the region is polluted—ChevronTexaco even admits to some damage. But the company claims that any damage caused by drilling was "minimal" and "normal for any operation," according to company vice-president and legal counsel Ricardo Reis Vega. The plaintiffs claim that in order to save money, Texaco dumped 18.5 billion gallons of waste into open, unlined pits, instead of the common practice of re-injecting it into the ground. Now the Ecuadoreans want the pits cleaned up.

Reis Vega added that Texaco violated no Ecuadorean environmental laws and that its \$40 million agreement with the government to clean up the pits released the corporation from future liability.

According to Cristobal Bonifaz, lead attorney for the plaintiffs, any cleanup work Texaco claimed to do was either incomplete or not done at all. "Look," says Bonifaz, "we think it is a fraudulent con-

God is Love 10.0

God hates fags. Under this and other catchy slogans the Rev. Fred Phelps and his followers have mounted a crusade against the sin of Sodom. Phelps achieved notoriety in 1998 when he led members of the Westboro Baptist Church in a demonstration at the funeral of Matthew Shepard, the victim of a grisly homophobic murder in Laramie, Wyoming.

Phelps can't seem to get over his obsession with Shepard. According to the Web site 365gay.com, the preacher plans to erect a monument commemorating Shepard's death in the victim's hometown, Casper, Wyoming. The monument will be inscribed with the following message:

Matthew Shepard
Entered Hell October 12, 1998, in
Defiance of God's Warning: "Thou
shalt not lie with mankind as with
womankind; it is abomination."
Leviticus 18:22.

Phelps has announced his intention to place the monument

in City Park in downtown Casper. The park already has a monument to the Ten Commandments, and according to a circuit court ruling the city must give equal space to other political and religious points of view. It remains to be seen whether Phelps' interpretation of the gospel qualifies as such.

Have We Tried Slaughter 4.0

Some days it's tough being a chicken hawk. Your president starts a really expensive foreign war, which seems to oust a second-rate bad guy (though nobody knows for sure). For awhile things go swimmingly. But just as the hard part begins, the commander-in-chief dresses in military drag and declares victory. Then one day it dawns on the public what a bloody mess empire-building is. Soldiers keep dying. The chicken hawk becomes desperate. He wants more action. "Honestly, it's a little tougher than I thought it was going to be," confessed Sen.

BY DAVE MULCAHEY

Trent Lott of Mississippi, the ex-majority leader, as reported in *The Hill*. But then he showed the stuff he's made of. "If we have to," he added, "we just mow the whole place down, see what happens."

I am a Diva, Too 2.3

When the man who saved Pvt. Jessica Lynch visited her hometown recently, he found the heroine was too busy to greet him. The townsfolk of Palestine, West Virginia did their best to welcome Mohammed al-Rehaief and his family, according to the *Telegraph*, but it was plain that Lynch cut him cold.

The *Telegraph* speculates that a rivalry may be to blame. Pvt. Lynch, whose capture and rescue in Iraq thrilled the Amer-

ican public, got a million bucks to write a memoir of the experience. *I Am a Soldier, Too*, as the tome is to be titled, is due in November and will no doubt add new wrinkles to the improbable saga shopped around last summer by U.S. military press agents. Unfortunately for Lynch, her book will share shelf space with al-Rehaief's recently published recollection of the ordeal, *Because Each Life is Precious*, in which the Iraqi describes how he braved bullets to alert the U.S. Army to Lynch's whereabouts.



TERRY UJIAN