

James O'Keefe's Newest Target Appears To Be A Small, Progressive Economic Think Tank



WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Among members of Washington D.C.'s think tank community, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) is known as a den for unbending liberals. The group works to stake out a progressive pole in the national debate. But in the age of President Obama, its influence has been limited. Despite having had an alum in the administration -- Vice President Biden's former chief economist Jared Bernstein -- it has found itself, more often than not, disillusioned with the president's embrace of austerity measures and his willingness to support moderate policies.

So when EPI's President Lawrence Mishel was targeted last week in what appeared to be a conservative media sting operation, led by infamous saboteur James O'Keefe, it was a point of pride. The 25-year-old non-profit think tank officially has enough gravitas to be vilified.

"I'm honored to be the subject of their attention," Mishel told The Huffington Post. "When we get attacked by the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, I tell my people, 'Be proud.' I never got listed by Glenn Beck. I felt left out because I feel like I'm an important person on the left."

While it remains uncertain whether or not EPI has become the subject of one of O'Keefe's undercover investigations -- the list of past subjects includes ACORN, CNN, National Public Radio, Occupy Wall Street, and Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) -- several signs suggest that he targeted the think tank.

Last week, both Mishel and Amy Hanauer, the founding executive director of the group Policy Matters Ohio, received cryptic phone calls from a person identifying himself as Luke Fowler. Fowler explained that he worked as a researcher for a hedge fund manager named Peter Harman who was interested in funding a study showing that cuts to education and collective bargaining rights would hurt students. Harman, Fowler added, was associated with the Ohio Education Association, a union that represents some 130,000 teachers and faculty members.

The implication was clear. If Mishel could produce the data, he would get the money. "He wanted me to do something to show that spending cuts were going to hurt children in schools," Mishel said. "I told him, you know, you can't buy results."

Hanauer's call came later and was nearly identical. "They were fishing for us to say we would release it if it had a pro-union point of view or kill it if it didn't," she recalled. "He asked me some fishy questions. I think he was simply trying to make me feel tempted to tell me what he wanted."

Ryan Girdusky, a spokesman for Project Veritas, the 501(c)3 organization O'Keefe started, declined to confirm whether EPI was the subject of an ongoing investigation, arguing that it would undermine the remainder of the group's work.

"We can't discuss our actual tactics or what we are working on right now," he told The Huffington Post. "Obviously when you are doing an investigation, if you revealed that the whole thing would be a bust ... So, we can't really discuss that."

But Hanauer and Mishel both managed to untangle certain threads. When pressed, Fowler offered up a phone number and email address for Harman, the interested hedge fund manager. Calls placed to the phone number, which began with a southeastern Ohio area code, went straight to voicemail. Emails sent to the email address, meanwhile, bounced back instantaneously. That's because the address given -- peterharmon@ohioedassoc.org -- used a domain that doesn't actually exist. The Ohio Education Association uses the domain ohea.org.

So who runs ohioedassoc.org? The website, according to online records, is registered to Shane Cory, the Acting Executive Director of Project Veritas. Reached by phone, Cory noted that he owns "hundreds" of domain names. Later he confirmed that this particular one was indeed owned by Project Veritas. "From there," he added, "I really don't know what's going on."

Mishel and Hanauer don't know either. Neither of them were especially concerned about being caught in a quasi-journalistic endeavor that was, first and foremost, designed to embarrass them. As one democratic economic adviser told The Huffington Post, people in the progressive community have become jaded and skeptical of individuals who, without obvious reason, insert themselves into their field of study or policy universe. Yet even if Mishel and Hanauer's words had been doctored in such a way that made it look like they were interested in pay-for-play economics, each has a lengthy history of arguing in support of the positions in question without taking hedge fund money for it.

"He was trying to get me to say, yeah, give me the money and I will come up with a report that says cutting back on school funding is going to hurt school kids," said Mishel. "Which actually is the truth -- I could have given him evidence that shows that."