

Feds break blue wall

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DETROIT -- Prosecutors told a jury in federal court Feb. 11 that they have brought down the "blue wall of silence" in their efforts to convict 18 police officers of conspiring to violate people's constitutional rights.

Assistant U.S. Attorney John Engstrom said in his opening statement that two officers, Troy Bradley and Nicole Rich, have pled guilty in the case and will testify against their co-defendants.

Engstrom said other "officers, sergeants and lieutenants" will also testify for the government, in addition to residents who the government says were falsely charged, jailed, beaten and threatened with death in 19 separate incidents.

"Several of our witnesses are or were criminals, and I will never attempt to justify their records," Engstrom said. "But the police officers are also criminals. While some of the witnesses sold drugs -- or their bodies -- the officers sold the integrity of their badges, and sold lies to prosecutors, judges and juries."

In addition to falsely charged civilian witnesses with criminal records, Engstrom said he would produce others with no records.

They will include a laid-off city worker and a Detroit truck driver who was

over-heard by several indicted officers telling his wife that he thought three-time killer cop Eugene Brown should not be promoted.

Engstrom said the truck driver, who made the comment over breakfast at an east-side restaurant, was beaten and arrested on misdemeanor charges that were later dismissed.

The eight officers from the Third and Fourth Precincts, currently on trial in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn, are Matthew Zani, aka "Spike"; William Melendez, aka "Robocop"; Christopher Ruiz, Jeffrey Weiss, Timothy Gilbert, Mark Diaz, Jerrod Willis and Denny Borg. Eight others are expected to face trial in the spring.

Engstrom said the officers all belonged either to the so-called "30 Series" group of plainclothes officers based in the 4th precinct, or the "Gang Squad" of plainclothes narcotics officers, which had city-wide jurisdiction.

He characterized William Melendez, leader of the 30 Series, (see box) and Matthew Zani as ring-leaders of a conspiracy covering incidents between April 2000 through January 2004. Engstrom described searches and seizures of drugs and guns in defendants' homes conducted without warrants, phony 911 calls placed by officers to justify home invasions, planting of evidence, beatings and death threats.

In one case, he said, Melendez told a witness who testified on behalf of one falsely charged individual, "If anyone testifies against me or my crew, they're dead, so, b----, consider yourself dead." He said Melendez similarly threatened police officer Nicole Rich.

The police officers are currently suspended without pay. DPD's Internal Affairs unit is assisting in their prosecution. Marty Bandemer, president of the Detroit Police Officers Association, was not available to comment on reports that the DPOA is paying for the officers' defense.

During their separate opening statements, defense attorneys said the officers were carrying out a just crusade against a "netherworld of drug dealers, prostitutes and pimps," and are being framed by the government's witnesses.

"These are not the kind of people who are used to telling the truth," said Frank Eaman, attorney for Zani. "Almost all the witnesses have a motive or reason for telling you a story. Many gained their freedom by testifying for the FBI, and many have filed lawsuits to collect substantial monetary payouts."

Eaman said defendants Bradley and Rich turned on their fellow officers to avoid jail time, and that testimony expected from unindicted uniformed officers is due to their jealousy of the plainclothes units and the records of the indicted officers.

Melendez and Zani have both received commendations from the 4th precinct for arresting over 300 people apiece annually, during different years.

Cohn earlier cautioned the jury, comprised of 12 whites and four African-Americans, to look at testimony that is given in exchange for promises of clemency differently from other testimony.

The trial of the eight officers is expected to last from six to nine weeks, with court sessions taking place from 9 am to 1 pm daily. All parties in

the cases, including attorneys, friends and families of the defendants and of the witnesses, are under a broad gag order from Cohn not to discuss the case with the media.

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