## 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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