

FBI Probes Terror in West Side Politics

BY WILLIAM CURRIE

Political terrorism in Chicago's West Side wards is under investigation by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents on orders from United States Department of Justice officials in Washington.

The federal agents are probing reports of continuing physical threats to members of a West Side voters' rights group in their efforts to assure an honest election on Nov. 7.

Yesterday the agents questioned an unsuccessful candidate for 29th Ward committeeman who has charged that his wife was kidnapped and his house burned down since he challenged in Circuit Court his defeat last March by Sen. Bernard Neustein (D., Chicago).

Tommie Durham, 44, a West Side businessman, challenged Neustein's write-in election, charging that the state senator does not live in the ward. He

is appealing the case in a higher court because the suit was dismissed by Circuit Court Judge Harry G. Comerford.

Wife Threatened

Durham told agents that his wife, Lucille Durham, was held by two black men for two days in June after they grabbed her at gunpoint on a West Side street. The men told her: "We'll show him," Durham said.

Durham said the incident happened while the challenge of Neustein's election was pending before Judge Comerford. He also told agents that his house, at 2950 W. 5th Av., was burned to the ground after a mysterious explosion May 27.

After those two incidents, Durham told the agents, his son, Odell, 24, was killed on a construction site in Flossmoor on June 21. The county coroner's office lists no witnesses to the death, which appeared

to have stemmed from a fall from a scaffold. Young Durham was found lying under the scaffold in a pool of blood and died later in a Blue Island hospital.

The federal agents recently questioned Wesley Spraggins, leader of the West Side coalition group known as POWER, about specific incidents of terror directed at him and members of his group who gathered 20,000 signatures on petitions calling for federal supervision of their polling places.

Volunteers Dwindle

Spraggins was among a group last month that took those signatures to the White House and U. S. Justice Department officials in Washington.

Informed sources said that the agents also are checking the validity of those signatures to include in a report to Washington officials on the extent

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of voting irregularities in Chicago's black communities. The Justice Department is expected to announce some plan of action for the November election soon, sources said.

Beginning this summer, Spraggins and more than 80 community volunteers gathered signatures on the petitions calling for a federally supervised election. In a short time, Spraggins said, the volunteers dwindled to a hard core of 15 persons under constant threat from unknown callers.

Agents are looking into police reports that one of the volunteers was beaten and robbed by two black men while he was gathering the signatures at the corner of Pulaski Road and Polk Street late last summer.

The attackers told the victim, Ron Sarpy, an officer of the Corkley Community Men's

Club, to stop associating with the POWER voters' movement.

Spraggins said he has been the center of threats. He told the agents that last Sunday an anonymous caller to the POWER offices, 820 S. Pulaski Rd., threatened "to blow my head off if I stuck it out the door."

The POWER group, at a press conference Wednesday, offered the names of several hundred West Side residents to the Board of Election Commissioners to work as Republican election judges in the November election.

The group's trip to Washington, with the signatures calling for federal surveillance of polling places, followed and corroborated Tribune disclosures that Democratic precinct bosses have been controlling selection of Republican judges for West Side precinct polling places.