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NY shippers seek to regain control of port labor

By VICTOR EPSTEINAP posted: 10:44 AM 10/20/09

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NEWARK, N.J. -The New York Shipping Association is trying to regain control of port labor in a move critics claim would open workers to the same kind of mob exploitation that inspired the film "On the Waterfront."

Joseph Curto, the Shipping Association's president, asked New York lawmakers Monday to return oversight of the 6,000 longshoremen, checkers, security officers and special craft workers in the Port of New York and New Jersey to the industry.

Curto's testimony at a public hearing in New York City comes as the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor, which regulates hiring, is being reorganized. An August report by New York's inspector general found evidence of corruption at that bistate agency, which is also entrusted with combating mob influence in the port.

"This is an opportunity to refine the commission's mission," Curto told the New York Senate Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions. "The commission has strayed somewhat from its original mission, and we believe it once again needs to focus on its core law enforcement responsibilities."

Curto's organization bargains collectively with labor on behalf of the port's ocean carriers, terminal operators, stevedores, and marine related businesses.

The Port of New York and New Jersey is the largest port complex on the East Coast. Roughly 70 percent of port operations are in New Jersey. The Shipping Association estimates the port supports 270,000 jobs and moves \$190 billion worth of goods each year.

Activity at the port, however, has slowed in recent months amid the economic slowdown. The number of loaded containers moving through the port was down 16 percent in the first eight months of this year compared with the same period in 2008, according to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which

serves as port landlord.

Ronald Goldstock, the Waterfront Commission's New York representative, spoke out against the Shipping Association's proposal. He said his agency needs to continue to regulate hiring to keep out organized crime and promote ethnic diversity in the port work force.

"There's still mob influence on the waterfront," said Goldstock, a former director of the New York State Organized Crime Task Force. "One of the things that gives the mob its power over the industry is the surplus of labor. We want to ensure that doesn't occur."

Goldstock is helping clean up and modernize the Waterfront Commission, which was created in 1953 in response to the same newspaper investigation that inspired the Academy Award-winning film "On the Waterfront." He was joined by New Jersey Commissioner Barry Evenchick in August.

Evenchick replaced Michael Madonna, who was fired by New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine for an alleged pattern of cronyism and hiring abuse. Madonna supported stripping the Waterfront Commission of some of its labor oversight powers before his departure.

State Sen. Bill Perkins, who heads the New York Senate Committee on Corporations, said Monday that he was not swayed by the Shipping Association's plea for labor control.

"I'm not ready to take that authority away from the Waterfront Commission," Perkins said of its labor regulatory powers. "They still have to make that case."

Carl Biers, a spokesman for Local 1588 of the International Longshoremen's Association, said its 400 members also oppose the Shipping Association's proposal. The Bayonne local was placed under the oversight of a court-appointed monitor — former New York City Police Commissioner Robert McGuire— due to mob influence in 2003.

"If the shippers and the ILA could be trusted you wouldn't need the Waterfront Commission, but there's no reason to believe that's true," Biers said. "Organized Crime is still here and they prey on excessive labor with job selling, extortion and loan sharking."

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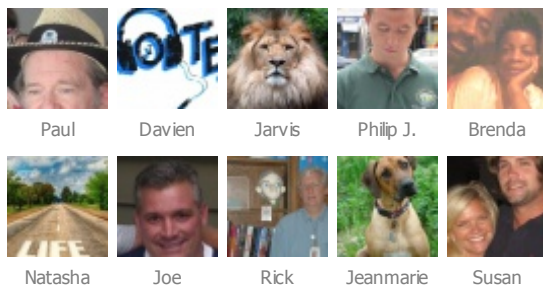
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