

Arab companies? Feds are worried about the mafia at ports

Union accused of being a "vehicle for organized crime"

NEW YORK (AP) -- Justice Department lawyers warned eight months ago that a nefarious element had infiltrated important East Coast ports, but they weren't talking about terrorists or Arab shipping companies.

They were talking about the mafia.

In a civil suit filed in July, prosecutors accused the International Longshoremen's Association, the 65,000-member union that supplies labor to ports from Florida to Maine, of being a "vehicle for organized crime" on the waterfront.

Packed with tales of corruption, embezzling and extortion, the complaint accused union executives of being associates of the Genovese and Gambino crime families.

The U.S. attorney's office asked a judge to seize control of the union, remove its officers and "put an end to the conspiracy among union officials, organized crime figures and others that has plagued some of the nation's most important ports for decades."

The allegations, assailed by the union as unjust and untrue, are inching toward trial amid heightened concern over port security.

The recent furor has revolved around the planned purchase of several U.S. shipping terminal operations by a company based in the United Arab Emirates. Critics say Dubai Ports World's Middle East ownership makes it ripe for infiltration by terrorists.

The company moved to defuse the controversy Thursday by pledging to turn over its American operations to a U.S. company.

But some port security experts say America already has a fifth column, of sorts, at work on its docks: gangsters who have made the piers friendly territory for drug smugglers and cargo thieves.

"Do we really think that terrorists aren't going to exploit this situation?" asked New York Sen. Michael Balboni, chairman of the state Senate's Homeland Security Committee.

Terrorists could use gangland networks to their advantage, said Joseph King, a former Customs Service agent and now a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

"It is an invitation to smuggling of all kinds, whether it is heroin, or weapons, or human trafficking," King said. "Instead of bringing in 50 kilograms of heroin, what would stop them from bringing in five kilograms of plutonium?"

ILA spokesman James McNamara said any suggestion that the union poses a security risk is "ludicrous."

"Nobody in America cares more about port security than the longshoremen," he said.

The ILA was among the early critics of the DP World deal, calling on the Bush administration on February 21 to scrutinize the company "to avoid even the impression of unnecessary risks."

"The union has done a lot, and has lobbied hard, to improve port security," said ILA lawyer Howard Goldstein.

In November, ILA assistant general organizer Harold Daggett and vice president Arthur Coffey were acquitted of rigging a union health care contract in favor of a mob-favored company. A third official, ILA executive vice president Albert Cernadas, pleaded guilty to fraud but received probation.

An alleged Genovese captain also was acquitted, even though he disappeared midway through the trial. His body was found in the trunk of an abandoned car outside a New Jersey diner.

Organized crime's role on the waterfront has long been the stuff of movies such as the 1954 "On the Waterfront" and TV's "The Sopranos." In one "Sopranos" episode, boss Tony Soprano bemoans weak port security as a potential threat to his children.

It has also been the subject of more than a few federal indictments.

From 1977 through 1981, prosecutors won conviction of 52 union officials on various mob and racketeering-related charges. In the most recent major case, reputed Gambino boss Peter Gotti was convicted in 2003 of waterfront racketeering.

While denying it was ever under mob control, the ILA has implemented some reforms, including the appointment of two retired judges as independent monitors of union ethics.

All longshoremen hired at the ports of New York and New Jersey are subject to a criminal history check by the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor. Balboni recently filed legislation that would empower the commission to also investigate whether any port hires have terrorist ties.

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