



Why kill the mob watchdog at the port?

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Tom Moran/ The Star-Ledger

Sen. Ray Lesniak, one of the big-shot power brokers in New Jersey politics, wants us to believe that organized crime at the Port of Elizabeth is no big deal anymore.

“Mob influence on shipping is no different than mob influence in any other industry,” he says.

To prove that he means it, he is moving now to kill the watchdog agency that is supposed to keep the mob out, the Waterfront Commission.

It’s an odd move. Because the list of the arrests at the ports during the last year reads like a screenplay for The Sopranos.

You have characters like Michael “Mikey Cigars” Coppola, a capo in the Geneoves crime family, convicted of racketeering for controlling the longshoreman’s local 1235 at the port. You have Gambino family characters as well, and a long list of assaults, extortions, no-show jobs, and cocaine smuggling. Tony’s boys would be right at home.

But what’s really strange about Lesniak’s move is the timing. Because the Waterfront Commission, long a sleepy and corrupt backwater, has cleaned up its act in the last few years. It is under tough new management by experienced mob-fighters. And they are putting new pressure on organized crime at the port.

“It’s strike me as bizarre,” says Ron Goldstock, who spent 14 years as head of New York State’s task force on organized crime, and now sits on the Commission.

“Why now?” he asks. “Because we’re doing stuff. We’re bringing in mobsters. We now pose a threat to the criminal element on the waterfront, and they’ve had their way for a long time. They see this as their last stronghold and they don’t want to give it up.”

Goldstock is not accusing Lesniak of working the mob’s agenda in Trenton. When the ACLU fights to restrict use of electronic eavesdropping, he says, it is helping the mob, too. But that’s not its purpose.

"He is certainly doing what the criminal element would like him to do," Goldstock says of Lesniak. "But I haven't the slightest idea what's in Lesniak's mind."

It's a common refrain on Lesniak. He is a tough one to figure. He points to the importance of God in his life, he does charity work, and he shows passion for causes that scare off other pols – gay marriage, opposition to the death penalty, treatment for drug addicts. That's the saintly Ray.

But the other Ray has made himself rich at a law firm that depends heavily on contracts with public entities. He's close to developers and an enemy to most environmentalists and affordable housing advocates.

"To understand Ray is to get an email from him ripping your head off with curses, and at the bottom it says 'We must eliminate the darkness and bring forth love and compassion'," says Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club. "Ray is an enigma. But he always believes what he's doing with evangelical zeal."

Which brings us back to the port. Lesniak says he wants to dissolve the Commission and give its job to the Port Authority. He believes an agency with a narrow mission, like fighting the mob at the port, is bound to exaggerate the problem to justify its existence.

And he thinks the Commission has been too intrusive when regulating shipping companies. The 2 percent payroll tax it levies to cover operations drives up costs, he says.

The snapping point came when the Commission moved to require that companies with shady backgrounds pay for an independent monitor to look over their shoulders. That's a common tactic, and it works, but Lesniak thinks it's overkill.

And so he went for the throat, dropping a bill that kills the Commission altogether.

It's a profoundly bad idea. But Lesniak's evangelical zeal has been aroused. And whether he likes it or not, the Genovese and Gambino families must be delighted by that fact.

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