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Dockworkers See Shoe on Other Foot After a Scandal

By [N. R. KLEINFELD](#)

For those who work on the New York waterfront, ministering to the big ships that plow into the harbor, a certain unflattering image accompanies the job. The equation that tends to define the spicy character of the place is simple: the waterfront = corruption.

The latest scandal to wash over the docks, though, prompted not embarrassment or anger, but a kind of jovial gratitude from many dockworkers. As word spread about a [blistering report charging pervasive lawlessness](#) inside the [Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor](#), the watchdog charged with rooting out mob-driven corruption on the piers, the dockworkers couldn't help but, well, chuckle.

Finally, it wasn't about them. The supposedly good guys were getting the treatment.

Under leaden gray skies at the Red Hook Marine Terminal in Brooklyn, dockworkers loading cargo containers onto a ship bound for Central America were having a good, gruff time with the development.

"I find it funny," said Nick Angilletta, 31, a longshoreman who works in ships' holds and has spent six years on the docks. "It's absolutely funny."

As to what would lead the agency to become corrupt, he said: "I think they learned and then they decided to do it themselves. It's like it rubbed off on them."

Red Hook is fabled dockworker territory, not necessarily for inspirational reasons. The mob violence and union corruption that long defined the piers were part of the underpinnings of the classic 1954 movie "On the Waterfront."

Mr. Angilletta said he would not know about any of that shady gangster stuff. "You hear the stories," he said.

“You don’t know. I don’t know of any fancy guys coming here with fancy loafers. We come to work dirty and leave dirty.”

Phil Felice, 62, a superintendent who has been on the docks for 35 years, said of the report on the commission, “When I saw it on the news, I said to my wife, ‘Look at this, isn’t that a joke!’ ”

The way he and other dockworkers saw it, maybe, just maybe, this would soften some of the smug feelings about the longshoremen and redirect them toward the regulators. Or, then again, maybe it would just compound things. Because if you work the waterfront, you live under suspicious eyes.

“You can be the straightest guy in the world and as soon as you say to someone you meet that you work on the waterfront, they look at you funny,” Mr. Felice said. “When I was raising my kids, I’d go to a hockey game and the parents start talking about what they do and I’d say I work on the waterfront and they’d back away. You’d get a look like ‘Uh-oh.’ At one point, I would lie and say I’m in the import-export business.”

Sal Lubrano, 39, a foreman, was barking orders as longshoremen loaded containers with the big gantry cranes. When the walkie-talkie stopped chirping, he said: “It’s kind of ironic, to tell the truth. It was always the workers that got the bad name. If the Waterfront Commission was doing what they say they were doing, that’s ridiculous.”

He didn’t feel compelled to gloat. “It’s a shame,” he said. “Bad stuff about the waterfront depresses you after a while. Let me do what I have to do to raise my family.”

He adores the waterfront. He lives six blocks away. “My father, grandfather, uncle all were longshoremen,” he said. “My father raised four kids off the industry. It’s not a job that everyone wants. We work in the snow and the sleet. I’ve always said the post office doesn’t have anything on the waterfront.”

The Waterfront Commission is not beloved among dockworkers. They spoke of how their complaints to the commission would enter black holes. They spoke of arrogant inspectors who strutted around the piers, checking licenses for no good reason, making the longshoremen feel small.

So few of the longshoremen felt pity when they learned that investigators concluded that the commission

employed patronage in hiring spectacularly unqualified candidates as detectives, hid a convicted felon's ownership of a company that operated on the waterfront, misused federal antiterrorism grants and stopped doing background checks on longshoremen and stevedoring companies.

Conoka Brown, a driver on the docks for more than nine years, and Juan Velasquez, 38, a checker with eight years, ate their lunch inside one of the beat-up sheds where workers take breaks.

"I feel good," Ms. Brown said about the uncovering of the commission scandal. "I thought they were corrupt."

She does not like commission detectives. She said they would come around and ask to see her badge when they already knew who she was. "Then they'd always pull their jacket back to make sure you saw their gun," she said.

"I do find it amusing," said Mr. Velasquez. "Sooner or later they were going to get caught. I wasn't surprised. Anyone who has worked down here for more than one day is not surprised."

Nicky Vitale, 36, who goes by Slic, is a laborer in the warehouse. He let the news run through his mind and simmer a moment. Then he had an idea that to him explained how regulators could go astray: "When you dig into something and see's there's money there, then you take it. Who's anyone going to turn to if you're the ones in charge? When you put a fat kid in a candy store, they're going to eat. They're going to pig out."

You think this way on the waterfront. How can you not? All the old-timers know stories. They usually have bad endings. It's the waterfront."

Keith Simmons, 41, a driver, said the mess made him angry. "Come on, now they'll need to find an agency to oversee the overseers," he said.

He said this kind of attention was important; you have to have the waterfront. "Things you take for granted, like bananas in the supermarket," he said. "Well, they come through the waterfront."

Across the harbor on the New Jersey docks, longshoremen were feeling chipper. They didn't much care for the commission, either. Robert Dickey, 49, an equipment operator at Global Terminal in Bayonne, who wore a T-

shirt that read “Troublemaker,” said the news gave him “immense pleasure.”

Eric Hayden, 40, who works at the Port Newark Container Terminal, summed it up: “As you can see with the state of affairs in New Jersey, this stuff is prevalent.”

In Red Hook, the ship was loaded. Rain spattered down. Most of the dockworkers were done. They could leave the waterfront.

Simon Akam contributed reporting.

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