

Still on the Waterfront

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The Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor, a bistate agency, was established in 1953 in response to pervasive corruption and organized crime penetration of the International Longshoremen's Association. The recent extortion charges announced by the commission and Attorney General Dow against the secretary-treasurer of an ILA local and his associates could have been filed in those days as well. A lot of things have changed on the docks in 50 years, but the core problem remains the same.

Longshoring is casual work. Longshoremen are hired and let go one loading or unloading job at a time. There are often more men than jobs, and the power to hire and assign work is the power to extort. Before the reforms of the 1950s, longshoremen were hired in a shape up at the docks. Union leaders and hiring bosses played favorites, and workers had to kick back part of their wages. Since the establishment of the Waterfront Commission, longshoremen are hired through a union-run hiring hall, which is supposed to give out work on the basis of seniority, but which can also be abused through corruption and favoritism. The current charges set out the historic pattern of extorting payment for favorable work assignments and paying the tribute upstream to organized crime.

Last year the commission was itself the subject of corruption and mismanagement charges, and New Jersey's commissioner was fired. At that time, questions were raised whether the agency had outlived its usefulness. It has not. The problems it was established to deal with remain, and a reinvigorated commission is confronting them under new leadership, in fruitful cooperation with the Division of Criminal Justice. At a time of governmental belt tightening, we must continue to support those units of government tasked with keeping us safe and ridding us of the stain of corruption that too often appears in this state

Editorial Board Vice-Chairman Barry Evenchick recused from this editorial.