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METROPOLITAN DESK

U.S. Said to Plan Rackets Lawsuit On Dock Union

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Federal authorities are preparing to file a sweeping civil racketeering lawsuit against the International Longshoremen's Association, officials who were briefed on the case said yesterday. It would be the government's most aggressive attempt ever to wrest the nation's Atlantic and Gulf Coast docks and the union that represents their workers from what prosecutors say is a half-century of control by two powerful New York mob clans.

Over several decades, the union, which is based in New York and represents 50,000 dockworkers and other employees at three dozen ports from Maine to Texas, came to symbolize organized crime's grip on labor and its exploitation of union members. The 1954 film "On the Waterfront" was based on the union, which over the years has evaded some of the most savvy prosecutors, even as some local union officials were indicted and convicted in the plundering of union funds and related businesses.

The union has also been the subject of a range of inquiries, including Senate hearings in the 1950's, the President's Commission on Organized Crime in the 1980's and lawsuits focusing on individual locals.

But prosecutors in Brooklyn, with evidence developed in a recent series of criminal cases aimed at organized crime on the piers, and with the cooperation of a major waterfront mob figure, hope to succeed where others have failed, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the lawsuit has not yet been filed. Using the federal civil racketeering law known as RICO, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations act, the government will seek to take over the union and several union benefit plans, one official said.

Prosecutors will also ask a federal judge to permanently bar five top union leaders, including the president, John Bowers; the secretary-treasurer, Robert E. Gleason; and the executive vice president, Albert Cernadas, from playing any role in the union or any of its pension benefit or welfare funds, the officials said. They will also seek to bar several reputed mob figures from the Gambino and Genovese families, the two groups prosecutors have said controlled the union for decades, from involvement with the union or any of its funds, the officials said.

"This is the culmination of years and years of investigations and other actions brought in connection with organized crime's connection to the I.L.A.," one of the officials said. "From the 50's all the way through the 90's, with the focus on the locals and bringing cases against many, many people over the years, there is a long history of effort that forms the bedrock of this case."

The lawsuit is being brought by the office of the United States attorney in Brooklyn, Roslynn R.

Mauskopf. It will say that Mr. Bowers, Mr. Gleason, Mr. Cernadas and two other union officials conspired with Gambino and Genovese mobsters to rig the 2000 election of high-ranking association leaders to ensure that a longtime Genovese associate would be in a position to succeed Mr. Bowers upon his eventual retirement, several officials said.

It will also say that the three top officials, along with Harold J. Daggett, a longtime Genovese associate and the union's assistant general organizer, and a union vice president, Arthur Coffey, conspired with members and associates of the two mob families to award union welfare and pension benefit fund contracts to companies tied to the mob.

Mr. Cernadas, Mr. Daggett and Mr. Coffey were charged last year in federal court in Brooklyn with extortion and conspiracy to control business on the docks in New York, New Jersey and Florida. They pleaded not guilty and are on paid leave from their union posts.

The union, in a statement released by its special counsel, Joseph D. McCann, said it had cooperated with the investigation and carried out substantial reforms, creating a code of conduct, instituting a hot line to report corruption and hiring a former judge and a former prosecutor to oversee its ethical practices. Milton Mollen, who is retired from the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court, will watch over the union, and Andrew J. Maloney, a former Brooklyn United States attorney, will oversee the benefit funds.

"We are disappointed that the government has leaked its intention to bring a civil RICO complaint even as we are engaging in negotiations with them," the statement said. "The government's action is likely to have a devastating economic impact on I.L.A. members and the shipping industry."

Efforts yesterday to reach the five I.L.A. officials through the union were unsuccessful.

One official said that 26 members of the association's executive council would also be named in the lawsuit.

The United States' attorney's office, along with the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor, the F.B.I. and the United States Department of Labor Inspector General's office, conducted the investigation over several years, one official said.

Among the criminal cases that helped develop the evidence on which the civil RICO suit is based were two that resulted in a dozen convictions of reputed Genovese and Gambino crime family figures, one of the officials said. One case was the 2003 racketeering conviction of Peter Gotti, then the acting boss of the Gambino family, on conspiracy and money laundering charges that included accusations that the family controlled the main longshoremen's local in New York. A former I.L.A. official, Anthony Ciccone, whom prosecutors identified as a Gambino captain, and Jerome Brancato, who they said was a Gambino soldier, were also convicted in that case.

In the second case, Liborio S. Bellomo, the former acting boss of the Genovese family, and another man were indicted on charges arising from what prosecutors said were their efforts to launder money they siphoned from I.L.A. benefit funds between 1996 and 1997.