Anger over cutbacks

New York firefighters storm "Ground Zero"

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More than 1,000 off-duty firefighters, chanting “bring the brothers home,” broke through police barricades and marched onto the World Trade Center site November 2 to protest Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s scaling back of efforts to recover the remains of victims of the September 11 disaster.

The protest saw scattered fist fights between firefighters and cops trying to hold them back, resulting in the arrest of a dozen protesters, some of whom were held incommunicado into the night in a Harlem police precinct far from the site of the rally. They were initially charged with inciting to riot, trespass and other criminal acts, but the most serious felony charges were subsequently dropped.

The city’s firefighters unions organized the protest after failing to convince the mayor and the New York Fire Department to rescind an order that reduced the FDNY’s role in the Ground Zero recovery effort to just two dozen firefighters. Previously, 180 had been assigned round-the-clock to the effort. Before the order issued last week, the number of firefighters had been pared down to 64.

Fewer than 90 bodies of the 343 fire department personnel killed in the collapse of the Twin Towers have been recovered. It is believed that the remains of thousands of civilians remain entombed in the rubble or were vaporized in the intense fires and crush of steel and concrete that followed the terrorist attack on the 110-story columns.

Fire union officials admitted that their members would have demonstrated whether they joined them or not. At a rally held several blocks from the site of the destroyed Twin Towers, the officials appeared ready to send the firefighters home after a few speeches, but the angry crowd began chanting, “Shut it down!” and surged southward along West Street toward the police cordons.

As they reached the first barricade, a policeman’s hat went sailing through the air and firefighters picked up metal barricades and threw them over the cops’ heads. After a few punches were thrown and some fell scuffling into the mud, the police lines parted and the firefighters marched onto the site where the World Trade Center formerly stood.

When they reached the area where giant cranes, backhoes and front-end loaders continue pulling out the fallen girders and debris from beneath the skeletal shell of the high-rise buildings, the police formed another skirmish line.

Slowly, the heavy machinery ground to a halt as hard-hatted ironworkers and operating engineers climbed off the heavy equipment and joined the protesters. Other construction workers stopped their labors on the shattered facades of the World Financial Center and other nearby buildings that suffered damage from the collapse of the Twin Towers and stared down at the Ground Zero confrontation.

One firefighter, dressed in a helmet and a turnout coat, screamed into the face of a police chief, “My brothers are still in there. Why have you got cops there standing in front of us?” He himself had lost his own brother, also a firefighter, on September 11. His brother’s body was found in the rubble 20 days after the collapse.

Firefighters dismissed claims by the city that the cutback was ordered out of concern for their safety. The real reason, they charged, was the demand by the city’s financial and real estate industries to speed up the removal of debris so that redevelopment could begin on the site. The search for bodies and the frequent discovery of body parts, often no more than bones, has repeatedly slowed work there.

The protesters also accused the city of wanting to reduce the amount it has been paying in overtime salaries to firefighters, who had previously joined the rescue effort on a voluntary basis on their days off. Now, the reduced contingent will be assigned there for up to 60 days during their regular working hours.

“They get worried about safety only when it serves their financial interests. They didn’t worry about it on September 11 or in the weeks after,” said a member of a Brooklyn ladder company who joined the protest. “This mayor loves us only when we’re dead.”

For nearly two months, the media and politicians like Giuliani have repeatedly declared the firefighters heroes, while rock stars and celebrities descended on the city to proclaim their solidarity. The eruption of rage at the Ground Zero demonstration, however, exposed deep-seated feelings that underneath the official flattery, their lives are considered expendable, while profit interests dictate policy.

“Yesterday they were heroes, today they’re going to be landfill,” was the bitter comment of one firefighter. The new

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debris removal policy, the protesters charged, will effectively halt the search for body parts. Instead, rubble will be loaded onto trucks and taken out to the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island.

"They got their gold," many in the crowd shouted as union officials delivered speeches. Firefighters and police had been assigned earlier in the week to remove tons of gold bricks that had been stored in a basement vault of the World Trade Center. Protesters complained that the recovery of these assets, which were loaded onto Brink's armored cars, was one of the city's principal aims, while finding the remains of their fallen comrades was viewed to be of little importance.

Outrage over the apparent abandonment of the effort to recover the bodies of those lost was the trigger for the protest, but the anger of the firefighters had been simmering for a long time.

Much of it was directed at Giuliani and his fire commissioner Thomas Von Essen, the former president of the Uniformed Firefighters' Association, who cultivated a relationship with the Republican mayor and then left the union to become the department's boss. Firefighters charge that the commissioner has frequently used confidential information he gained as a union official to exact vindictive retribution against those he disliked.

"Suck it up, Tommy Von," the firefighters chanted at the rally, referring to a recent television interview in which Von Essen said that his advise to firefighters with problems after September 11 was to "suck it up."

The remark, the kind of admonition normally given by bosses to someone airing petty gripes in the midst of a difficult situation, was condemned as grossly insensitive in a close-knit department, where virtually everyone has lost close friends and comrades and not a few have seen brothers, sons and fathers killed.

Fire officers at the rally said that the department's psychological counseling efforts have been woefully inadequate, given that many are traumatized by these losses, as well as the shattering experiences of September 11 itself and the gruesome work of combing the rubble for human remains in the weeks that followed. In a culture where seeking help for emotional problems is far from the norm, Von Essen's comment was seen as wildly inappropriate.

Other firefighters complained that they were ill-equipped and untrained to deal with the September 11 disaster and its aftermath. Every member of the department, one of them said, had received a course on dealing with terrorist incidents. The four-hour slide show that was instituted in recent years provided little in the way of guidance. Rather, they were told that those fire companies responding first to the scene were expected to die. The booklet they received for the course had a cover bearing an image of the World Trade Center towers with a bull's eye drawn over them.

Two fire companies that worked out of a firehouse that stood literally in the shadow of the World Trade Center's South Tower were dispersed following the attack, over the objections of their members. Department officials derided the companies because, after working for five weeks without letup at the disaster site, many of their members had gone on temporary sick leave. Senior officials have even suggested that the fact that "only" five firefighters from the house were killed in the disaster called into question the companies' performance.

According to the FDNY's chief medical officer, nearly 4,000 firefighters are suffering from chronic coughs and other lung conditions that he has dubbed "World Trade Center Syndrome." Firefighters said that in the two weeks following the disaster, they had worked on the pile of rubble with nothing but dust masks, while police officers assigned to the same duty were equipped with filtered respirators. Environmental groups have warned that the site poses extreme hazards from asbestos, benzene and other toxic substances.

Meanwhile, many firefighters who are responding to threats of anthrax have yet to be equipped with respirators to protect them from contamination. Two entire companies have been placed on the antibiotic Cipro after being the first to respond to a hospital where a worker died from the disease.

As the firefighters drifted out of Ground Zero, hundreds of construction workers lined their route clapping, shaking their hands and shouting words of encouragement.

Afterwards, several hundred firefighters walked east to City Hall where they gathered at the gate, chanting, "Rudy must go." Cops in helmets and riot gear took positions inside the wrought-iron fence, preparing to protect the mayor from the firefighters whose heroism and sacrifice he has tried to claim as his own. Mounted police were brought out to turn the crowd back from the road leading onto the Brooklyn Bridge. As it became clear that the cops were about to charge, union officials succeeded in dispersing the crowd.

The November 2 confrontation at Ground Zero is one more indication that beneath the façade of national unity and patriotism, the September 11 catastrophe has served to exacerbate the social tensions and class divisions that have grown so acute in recent years, particularly in New York City.

More than 115,000 have lost their jobs in the city since the collapse of the Twin Towers. The number of homeless, which had already climbed to a 14-year high in the weeks before the attack, has soared since, according to social service agencies. Lines at food pantries have lengthened dramatically.

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