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Fire union defiant on slugfest

Cops review videotapes

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A day after firefighters clashed with cops at the World Trade Center disaster site, fire union leaders remained defiant while detectives viewed video footage to identify protesting firefighters who allegedly punched ranking cops when emotions erupted at Ground Zero.

Uniformed Firefighters Association President Kevin Gallagher was arrested yesterday on a criminal trespassing charge stemming from the Friday morning melee, union spokesman Tom Butler said.

But charges were dropped yesterday against two of the 12 firefighters arrested during the altercation, which began with about 1,000 firefighters marching to the rubble to protest the city's decision to limit the number of recovery workers at the site.

Charges were downgraded for the other 10, who were nabbed in scuffles that broke out when police tried to stop the protesters a block from the ruins where the bodies of some 4,000 people — including more than 200 firefighters — remain missing.

Butler called Gallagher's arrest unjustified. "This is Stalinism, this is McCarthyism, this is fascism," he said. "It's complete harassment."

The clash came after eight weeks of grief and frustration by firefighters who lost 343 of their brothers, cops who lost 23 officers and the failure to recover most of their remains. Authorities believe they and the lost civilians were virtually disintegrated in the fire and collapse of the twin towers.

Capt. Peter Gorman, head of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, accused Mayor Giuliani of making "callous" and "insensitive" remarks after the protest. "I don't think it was appropriate for the mayor to get on and treat us like we were a bunch of thugs," Gorman said.

Lt. Jack Ginty, a UFOA officer who was charged with trespassing and misdemeanor harassment, said the cop who drove him to be booked at the 28th Precinct "was crying . . . he said it was a disgrace, we got set up."

But police remained angry the firefighters tried to muscle past them, and detectives subpoenaed footage of the scuffles from CNN to identify any who could be charged with assault. Fire Department spokesman Frank Gribbon said a felony charge would mean suspension.

Searching for their own

Tensions have sprung up at Ground Zero between cops and firefighters because some cops feel that firefighters were only searching for their own.

The new city policy restricts the number of firefighters and police officers at the scene to 25 from each department. At times, the number has been as high as 150.

City officials cited the safety and health hazards of having large numbers of firefighters searching through rubble amid cranes and excavation equipment.

Retired Firefighter Lee Telpi, who has been at Ground Zero since Sept. 11 searching for the remains of his firefighter son Jonathan, was at the rally.

He said firefighters working there "want to find everyone. Of course their brothers are important, but we want to try to find everybody . . . there are 4,200 people there, everybody deserves that dignity, that's what the whole thing comes down to. You can't just have construction equipment moving remains around."

Five police officers were injured during Friday's protest, which clearly angered Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik. Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen apologized to the injured officers on behalf of the Fire Department.

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