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Kerik blasts Bravest in melee

By LARRY CELONA, FRANKIE EDOZIEN and PHILIP MESSING

Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik last night ripped into firefighters involved in the brawl with cops at ground zero, vowing to continue to root out those involved — as union leaders rallied behind the busted Bravest.

"You cannot assault a police officer and you cannot trespass into an area where you're not allowed to go ... This is unacceptable behavior," said Kerik, standing next to Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen.

Von Essen appeared to try to ease tensions between the battling departments — and himself and his own troops — by insisting that the reduction of firemen working to find bodies in the World Trade Center rubble was part of "a strategic change."

"If this number [of recovery workers] doesn't appear to be enough, then we'll increase that number," he said.

But sources said that still-boiling Bravest planned to hold another rally after a funeral at St. Patrick's Cathedral today for a firefighter killed in the trade center attacks.

Police last night said they were braced for the possible new protest at ground zero.

Friday, angry firefighters, protesting the reduction in ground-zero workers during a rally near the site, had clashed with cops who tried to keep them from entering the frozen zone. Five police officers were hurt in the melee.

A dozen firefighters arrested for their roles were identified partly through video footage and photos. Two top union officials also were busted over the weekend.

"I am absolutely outraged. Two of my young firefighters were lost [Sept. 11], and there was a memorial visitation this afternoon, [and] Mayor Giuliani hauled me to court," raged Capt. Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, after his arraignment on a trespassing charge.

Union lawyer Steven Rabinowitz said Gorman was arrested because he had the courage to publicly attack Giuliani for allowing the other firefighters to be busted.

"In the mayor's view, these men are heroes as long as they shut up and do what they're told," Rabinowitz said.

City union leaders backed up the firefighters and demand an immediate apology from Giuliani.

Brian McLaughlin of the Central Labor Council, said the mayor "treats these people like they're bums — with no respect."

Union officials said they may sue the city for false arrest and malicious prosecution.

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