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Arrests of Firefighters Stopped

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STAFF WRITERS

The arrests of firefighters thought to have been involved in a rowdy demonstration last week was stopped yesterday and the investigation halted, police said.

The announcement came the same day that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani doubled the number of firefighters working at the World Trade Center site to 50 after cutting the number to 25 last week, sparking protests from firefighters.

Giuliani said at the time that the move was meant to protect firefighters and other rescue workers. But firefighters said it had turned a dignified search for 250 firefighters and thousands of civilians still missing into a "scoop and dump" operation.

Halting the arrests and increasing staffing did not placate the anger of the firefighting unions.

"The fact they increased the number proves that this was never about safety. They lied," said Capt. Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.

Police had arrested 18 active or retired firefighters during and after the Nov. 2 protest in which officials said five police officers were punched or otherwise injured.

However, none of the arrested firefighters has been charged with assault or related offenses, and all the felony charges lodged by police were reduced to misdemeanors by the Manhattan district attorney's office.

The district attorney's office said yesterday that all 18 have been offered a deal under which the charges would be dropped after six months if the defendants stayed out of further trouble, an arrangement called "adjourned in contemplation of dismissal."

At a City Hall news conference yesterday, both Giuliani and Fire Commissioner Tom Von Essen blasted union officials for acting as if they had a "monopoly on caring about this."

"They really are so off base that it's a sin, and I mean that in a moral sense," Giuliani said. "The name calling that they're engaging in is disgusting and what they're doing is really, really sinful."

"We were not handling it as a safe site, and every expert that looked at it, including some that you published in your newspapers, criticized it for how dangerous it was," the mayor said.

Von Essen said that the use of the term "scoop and dump" to describe the operations at Ground Zero was "disgraceful."

Asked if he felt the unions were trying to exploit the families of fallen firefighters, a visibly emotional Von Essen said: "I'm trying not to use words like that."

Von Essen did say that "I think where I dropped the ball was not getting the word out how we were going to change the process and just changing it the first day."

The families of several missing firefighters have come to the defense of the fire unions and blamed Giuliani and Von Essen for not caring about those lost in the disaster.

Staff writer Dan Janison contributed to this story.

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