

the village  
**VOICE**  
News

You'd want to believe that the schemers who kept New York City's school-bus industry under the Mafia's thumb for more than 30 years would be a pretty tough bunch. Who else could keep mayors, bureaucrats, and prosecutors at bay for decades while feeding like voracious bedbugs off the city's most vital enterprise?

But consider Salvatore "Hot Dogs" Battaglia, the hapless ex-union official who must face a federal judge later this month for sentencing, having admitted his own role in the extortion schemes that have long plagued the bus business. Prosecutors argue convincingly that Battaglia, a former school-bus driver, was groomed for his position by the powerful [Genovese crime family](#). The mob was so satisfied with his performance, the government says, that it even made him a soldier—a rank supposedly reserved for those with criminal talent.

The government is a lot less convincing when it describes this sad sack as "organizer, leader, and manager" of the school-bus rackets. The life and career of Sal Battaglia, 61, suggest more [Ralph Kramden](#) than [John Gotti](#). He was a go-along-to-get-along guy lucky enough to find himself in the right place at the right time, a schnook with a swollen ego that his Mafia pals were happy to massage as long as he kept the money flowing and a sometimes restless rank-and-file union membership under control.

Until the mob gave him his dual promotion, Sal Battaglia didn't have a lot to boast about. The son of a delivery man and a seamstress, he grew up in a three-room Little Italy flat where he slept in the kitchen while his two brothers shared the bedroom with his parents. He got as far as the 10th grade in school. He went to work as a bus driver, where the best thing that happened to him was meeting his wife, Francine, who was working as a matron.

After he was bumped up to the top slot at the 15,000-member Local 1181 of the [Amalgamated Transit Union](#) in 2001, he used casual intimidation with members and employers alike. He showed up at City Hall and on TV when contract talks were underway, trying to sound like a labor leader. But as he admitted in January when he pled guilty, he regularly took payoffs from employers, including some who paid for the privilege of staying union-free.

Today, Battaglia can't even convince prosecutors that he is a legitimate alcoholic. In a memo submitted to [Judge Kimba Wood](#), who will decide Battaglia's fate, the defendant's attorney, [Joseph Benfante](#), states that his client has had a substantial drinking problem since 1990 and suffers from alcohol-related "blackouts." The government counters that the ex-union big is just a guy who likes to drink, with "a preference for [Captain Morgan](#)" rum. He's pretending to be an alky, the government says, in order to qualify for a prison treatment program that could shave a year off his sentence.

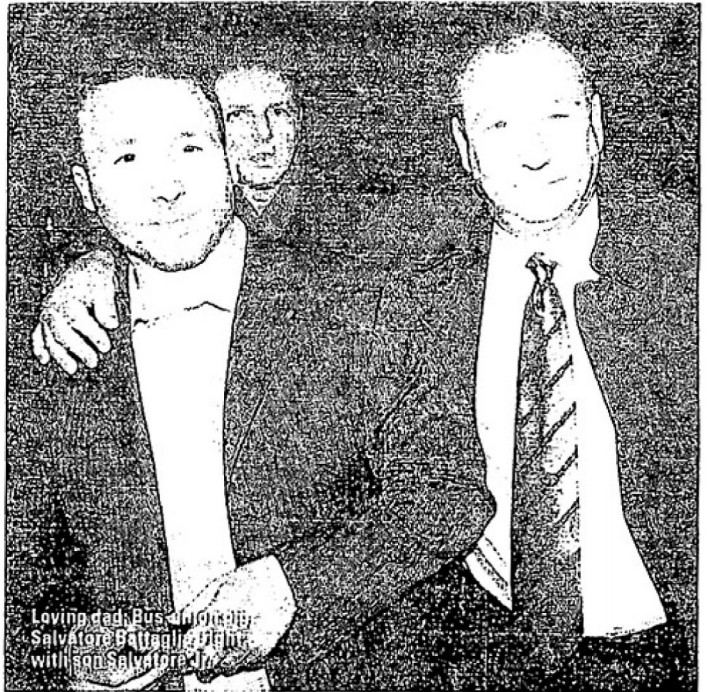
But there's no denying his ailments. Before the mob found a use for him, Battaglia was a self-admitted depressive with "a history of nerves," as his doctor put it in 1984. That diagnosis came after the bus driver had a breakdown following a [Tony Soprano](#)-like dust-up with his family that resulted in a week-long stay at the [South Beach Psychiatric Center on Staten Island](#).

Those nerves got fried again after he was initially arrested by the [FBI](#) in 2005 for lying to a grand jury probing the Genovese clan's hold on his union. A doctor prescribed [Xanax](#) for acute anxiety. But he was already a wreck. Following his elevation to the union's top Hot Dog, Battaglia developed bleeding ulcers, acid reflux, and high blood pressure—the usual executive complaints.

The blood pressure shot even higher when he was re-arrested in November 2006, this time for taking payoffs from employers and shaking down union vendors. The feds got the goods on Battaglia courtesy of a veteran union official who really did fit the bill as a mob prince of darkness. Julius "Spike" [Bernstein](#), the local's former secretary-treasurer, would almost certainly have been a star Mafioso if it wasn't for the mob's own self-defeating ethnic ban against non-Italians. Even as a Jewish outsider, Spike Bernstein did pretty well. He was the longtime top aide to Genovese legend Matthew "Matty the Horse" Ianniello, who decided who got what in the bus industry. According to union members, it was Spike who made the tough decisions upstairs at the local's offices on [Woodhaven Boulevard](#) in [Ozone Park](#).

Bernstein started secretly cooperating with the [FBI](#) shortly after his own arrest on extortion charges in June 2006. He didn't make it to the witness stand, however, succumbing to diabetes last year at the age of 86. Although prosecutors have kept a lid on most of what Bernstein told them, they stated in court papers that the geezer gangster said Battaglia became a made man right at the same time he became president of the local.

According to a source wise in wiseguy ways and knowledgeable about the union, it was Bernstein's idea that Battaglia should get his mob wings so that they'd have strong allies when the elderly Ianniello kicked off. ("The Horse," at 87, lives on, serving 18 months for his own role in the bus schemes).



Mark A. Hermann/Daily News Pix



There are enough heart-rending letters in the court file from Battaglia's allies—all of whom are distraught at his looming departure—to convince even his toughest critics that he was a caring father, concerned neighbor, and devoted friend. One neighbor, an ex-NYPD detective, wrote Judge Wood to tell how he ran into Battaglia at church during a novena service: "He stated to me his friend's wife had cancer and he was asking God's help for him."

Under his plea agreement, Battaglia faces from 57 to 71 months. [Warren Zaugg](#), who has been driving a school bus for 30 years, says he hopes his ex-president gets the max. "He was Mr. Greedy, Mr. Arrogant," says Zaugg, who recalls Battaglia's words when he complained that his boss was refusing to pay overtime after 40 hours. "Sal says to me, 'That's the way it is. You don't like it, go to the labor board.' "

Zaugg and other drivers say they're less interested in Battaglia's fate than their union's. Zaugg belongs to Members for Change, a rank-and-file group that helped force a takeover by the local's national parent. So far, they say, it hasn't done much good. "Battaglia is gone, the international is here, but all the Sal Battaglia agents are still in charge," says [Simon Jean-Baptiste](#), another driver. "These are the people, when we demanded reform, they said everything is fine."

Also undisturbed, now that the legal dust has settled, are the bus industry's employers. The government has taken the position that the operators were the victims here, and only paid off the wiseguys out of fear of economic retaliation. If so, they made good investments. The ones that paid to stay nonunion remain that way. Others have grown to become national corporations.

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