

# A shame on the shield

By Kevin Cullen

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You may have heard that police officers across Massachusetts are none too pleased with our governor, Deval Patrick, who has curtailed their ability to earn money working paid details.

To register their displeasure, about 50 off-duty cops from a half-dozen departments surrounded some guy holding a stop sign at a work site in Woburn on Tuesday and heckled him. One of them drove the wrong way down the street and disingenuously claimed the flagman had sent him in the wrong direction. This follows police picketing Friday, which forced state workers to abandon work sites in Revere and Everett.

Apparently, these cops have taken the new movie "How To Lose Friends & Alienate People" way too literally.

What happened Tuesday was nothing short of thuggish intimidation. And it is not going to endear the aggrieved police officers to whatever segment of the population they think these publicity stunts are going to win over. News organizations, including the Globe, have been getting e-mails from cops looking for us to cover these confrontations. They actually think this is helping their cause.

Before you get the wrong idea, and before the great Jim Carnell, the Area A representative for the Boston Police Patrolmen's Association, sends yet another rocket my way, let me state, categorically: I think police officers and their unions have a legitimate grievance. Their working conditions were changed unilaterally, preventing them from making the same amount of money they were accustomed to.

Paid details have for generations been a way for police officers to supplement their income. Cops have gotten married, started families, bought houses, sent kids to school, all based not on their base salary, but on the reality that they could earn extra money when needed by working details. It's no different than people in other lines of work being able to earn overtime.

You can say that was wrong, and that Massachusetts shouldn't have been the last state in the nation to have flaggers working construction sites instead of cops, but it doesn't change the fact that cops' lives were constructed on a paradigm that has been suddenly, unilaterally, and unfairly changed.

Rick Jolly, president of the Woburn Police Patrolman's Union, engaged in not a little hyperbole at Tuesday's protest when he complained, "They're taking food off our table." Look, nobody's going to starve because the state will save \$6 to \$7 million a year by having civilian flaggers work details on some roads. But lifestyles will change. You might say, too bad. You wouldn't say that if you had gotten a mortgage, or were able to take your kids on vacation, based on the money you were able to make working details.

But here's where the cops lose the plot. They keep saying this is primarily a public safety issue. They are absolutely right to say a cop with a gun working a detail is a greater asset to public safety than some unarmed civilian waving an orange flag.

There are more than a few cases of police making arrests or saving lives while working details.

But that's precisely what made Tuesday's protest so patently offensive. Some of the cops who congregated around that work site endangered public safety. Calling the poor working stiff holding the sign a "scab" might score some points with their buddies, but it doesn't play quite as well with the people who pay cops' salaries. It was ugly, and it demeaned the officers who shouted the abuse more than the flagman.

Don't tell us this is primarily about public safety and then go out and flout it. Don't say it's about dignity and then go out and act undignified. Tell the truth: Money you were entitled to earn is no longer there. And that's not fair.

There's no shame in saying that. But what happened on Lexington Street on Tuesday afternoon was shameful.■