

Union dock workers clash with police at South Carolina port

Jerry White
21 January 2000

Hundreds of dock workers clashed with police early Thursday morning in Charleston, South Carolina during a protest against the use of nonunion longshoremen to load a cargo ship. At least six people were sent to the hospital with injuries, including one worker who was run down by a police car, and eight workers were arrested on trespassing charges. The clash at the US's sixth largest port was the most violent labor dispute on the Charleston waterfront since the late 1960s.

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has held informational pickets at the port since early December when the Danish shipping line, Nordana, began using nonunion dockworkers to load and unload its freighters. On January 2, 75 union longshoremen blocked the terminal gate for a short time, obstructing traffic. At the time, port authorities claimed that two nonunion workers were assaulted and some equipment and cargo vandalized.

Tuesday afternoon more than 600 police, including Highway Patrol troopers from around the state, were brought in to guard about 20 nonunion workers loading the *Nordana Skodsborg*. On Wednesday evening, when two ILA protesters approached the entrance of the States Ports Authority (SPA) Columbus Street Terminal, they were confronted by more than 100 police and state troopers in riot gear. Armored police cars drove in and out of the terminal gates, while a police helicopter hovered above, using a searchlight to find additional pickets.

Around midnight a crowd of 600 workers, who had been meeting in the nearby union hall, marched to the terminal entrance and began shouting union slogans. An angry standoff ensued, until police unleashed their attack dogs, injuring several workers. The protesters responded by throwing rocks, bricks and other debris, and tearing down police spotlights.

At 12:30 a.m. the police charged, driving their vehicles towards the demonstrators, firing smoke grenades and attacking with wooden batons. As the protesters retreated, a police car struck one of the workers. The ILA workers screamed at police, heaved parts of a railroad tie at them and overturned a temporary light pole. According to the *Charleston Post and Courier* protesters also attacked a television cameraman and news photographer filming the scene.

Police over a loud speaker ordered the workers to disperse, saying the protest had been declared an unlawful assembly. "There will be no innocent parties," the officer said. To punctuate the threat of further police violence several ambulances then began arriving at the scene. At about 12:45 the police charged again and pushed the protesters back away from the terminal, back toward the union hall. Several protesters were arrested.

Police closed off several blocks leading to the terminal for hours following the incident, but the streets were reopened shortly before 8 a.m. Meanwhile the Danish freighter left Charleston in the predawn hours.

Before the battle ILA Local 1422 President Kenneth Riley Jr. commented on the massive police presence at the port, saying, "If you're training for some type of terrorist attack, I can understand this response. But you're not dealing with a group of thugs here. These guys are hardworking, good citizens of the city."

The eruption of anger by rank-and-file dockworkers apparently took the ILA officials by surprise. Riley and other union officials attempted unsuccessfully to calm the protesting workers, and had to be escorted from the scene.

Hoping to prevent a confrontation Riley and other union officers had met with Nordana representatives Tuesday afternoon in the offices of States Ports

Authority President and chief executive officer Bernard Groseclose Jr. Also present was the head of Nordana's nonunion stevedore company, Winyah Stevedoring.

The ILA local president offered to have his members work the Nordana vessel for free. He also discussed a “double breasting” arrangement, whereby the ILA longshoremen would work under the supervision of the nonunion company, but Nordana refused to allow ILA members to work the ship. “We offered to work the ship for nothing. We had other deals on the table,” a frustrated Riley told the Charleston newspaper after the meeting.

Port authorities were also dismayed at the failure of the union officials to hold back the anger of the longshoremen. SPA President Groseclose said, “Charleston has had an enviable reputation of having agreeable labor relationships, very smooth operations, and high productivity. And that's a credit to the longshore labor, our people and all the parties.”

Port officials said they expected the ILA and the company to resume talks before the next Nordana vessel returns to Charleston in about two weeks.

See Also:

Workers struggles around the world
[WSWS Full Coverage]

Port worker's wife killed on New Zealand picket line
[5 January 2000]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact