

# Longshoremen involved in protest face felony charges in South Carolina

Alan Whyte  
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The five dock workers who were arrested as a result of a confrontation with police and nonunion workers in South Carolina in January of last year will soon be facing trial, probably either in February or March. The workers, members of International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Locals 1422 and 1771 in Charleston, have been charged with rioting, a felony punishable by up to five years in jail.

The incident took place on January 20, 2000 when 600 riot-equipped police were deployed to protect 20 scabs loading the Danish freighter *Skodsborg*, owned by Nordana Lines. Some of the heavily armed officers were on horses, some in helicopters and others were stationed in boats.

Around midnight, about 600 workers left their union hall and marched to the terminal entrance and began shouting union slogans. Police initiated the attack by unleashing their dogs and injuring several workers. When the workers responded by throwing rocks, the police drove their vehicles towards the picket line firing smoke grenades and swinging wooden batons. As the protesters retreated, a police car struck one of the workers.

Local 1422 President Ken Riley, apparently taken aback by the militancy of the workers, attempted to create a buffer between the protesters and the police. Instead he got clubbed by one of the cops and is one of the five union members who have been indicted.

Originally, State Attorney General Charlie Condon sought the indictment of nine men for rioting. However, a preliminary hearing judge dropped the charges for lack of evidence. The district attorney—a right-wing Republican who is reportedly advising President-elect Bush about new personnel for the Justice Department—then went to a federal grand jury and successfully obtained an indictment of the five

men. He has said that his plan for them is “jail, jail, and more jail.” The five men are under a strict curfew and must stay in their homes between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. unless they are working or have some authorized union business. They are not allowed to leave the state.

In addition, the stevedoring company that brought in the 20 scabs to work at Nordana Skodsborg is suing the locals, their presidents and 27 individual members for \$1.5 million for alleged financial losses due to picketing. The two locals have offered to settle out of court by giving the company a sum of money without admitting guilt, but the company has refused the offer.

The conflict began when Nordana Lines announced on October 1, 1999 that it would end its 23-year relationship with the ILA and begin using nonunion labor to work its ships. Mr. Riley has explained that the union offered the company a concessions package that, according to him, translated into a 50 percent reduction in labor costs. Nevertheless, the company rejected the deal, and essentially stated that there was nothing that would alter its plans.

Nordana, a member of the Container Carrier Council, which represents more than 30 major steamship lines, is not acting alone. Under pressure from global corporations to lower labor costs associated with moving cargo, the shipping companies have aggressively moved to destroy dock workers' long-standing working conditions and living standards. This has resulted in major confrontations, from Liverpool, England and Australia to Chile and the Netherlands.

The Port of Charleston is the second largest on the East Coast of the United States and therefore a key location for the employers' assault on union rights. South Carolina already has the lowest unionization rate in the country, with only 3.8 percent of its workforce in unions. The racism of the state authorities is also

notorious as seen in their decision to continue flying the Confederate flag at the state capitol despite widespread protests. The membership of Local 1422 is more than 99 percent African-American.

The South Carolina and national AFL-CIO have felt compelled to announce a campaign in defense of the Charleston 5. However, despite the threat to the very future of unionism on the docks, the union bureaucracy has limited the campaign to organizing future protests, raising money for legal costs, relying on the courts and appealing to the Democratic Party. Despite their claim to be publicizing the case, few union members nationwide, let alone the general public, know anything about it.

The attempt to railroad these militant workers to jail is reminiscent of the anti-labor frame-ups that were used against striking coal miners, Greyhound bus drivers and other workers during labor struggles in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some of these workers remain in jail to this day. The widest campaign should be waged throughout the working class and among all defenders of democratic rights to demand the dropping of charges against the Charleston 5.



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