

# Rally held in South Carolina for the "Charleston Five" longshoremen

Alan Whyte  
12 June 2001

More than 4,000 workers and supporters marched at the state courthouse in Columbia, South Carolina on Saturday, June 9 demanding that all charges be dropped against five longshoremen accused of rioting during a confrontation with police and scabs in January 2000. If convicted of the felony charges they could face up to five years in jail.

Protesters from across the country chanted "Free the Charleston Five" and carried signs saying, "Justice for the Charleston Five." At one point, the crowd chanted "Shut the port down. Shut the port down." Union leaders circulated petitions calling on Democratic Governor Jim Hodges to intervene on behalf of the five longshoremen.

The charges originated from an incident that took place on January 20, 2000 when about 600 dock workers from International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Locals 1422 and 1771 in Charleston were confronted by about 600 riot-equipped police.

According to Local 1422 President Ken Riley, he had received information at that time that the police were planning to bust the union's picket line. Considering that 45,000 people demonstrated a few days earlier in Charleston against the Confederate flag being hoisted in the capitol dome, the police and the state government delayed their confrontation with the longshoremen until after the demonstrators had left.

The police, who were heavily armed, were deployed to protect 20 scabs unloading a freighter owned by Nordana Lines. Some of the officers were stationed on horses, some in armored vehicles, some in helicopters and others in boats. According to Riley, around midnight the workers left their union hall to go to the site of the scab operation when they found that one of the union members had already been attacked by the police and was lying on the ground.

When Riley tried to calm the situation and reduce the tension between the longshoreman and the police, he got clubbed on the head by one of the officers, causing an injury requiring 12 stitches. The police then charged the picket line with attack dogs. When the workers attempted to defend themselves with rocks, the police drove their vehicles into the workers, fired smoke grenades and swung wooden batons. Ten people were injured.

Originally, State Attorney General Charlie Condon sought the indictment of nine men for rioting. However, a preliminary hearing judge who watched a videotape of the conflict dropped the charges for lack of evidence. The district attorney, a right-wing Republican currently running for governor of South Carolina, then went to a federal grand jury and successfully obtained an indictment for five union men, including Riley. He has said that his plan for them is "jail, jail, and more jail."

The five men are under 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, and are not allowed to leave the state. Due to the legal restrictions that have been placed on them, none of the five were able to attend the rally. Some of the protesters held poster-sized photographs of the accused. Some of the family members spoke briefly at the rally explaining that the men were legally prohibited from attending various family functions, such as school activities of their children.

Lawyers for the Charleston Five have already attempted to negotiate with the attorney general, offering a plea bargain that would lower the charges to misdemeanors with community service to be served as sentence. The state attorney general has turned down the offer, and at one point offered an award to anyone

who would identify any of the longshoreman who were at the confrontation with the police.

In response to the rally, Attorney General Condon stated that he would not be “bullied or intimidated” into dropping the charges. He said, “The right to work in South Carolina will be protected as long as I am attorney general. We will not tolerate the work of the mob.” The five will be put on trial sometime in September, he said.

The conflict began when Nardona 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. After the confrontation with the police, the union has since reached an agreement with Nardona Lines by offering the company some major concessions. The union agreed to reduce manning of the work gangs and a guarantee of four hours per workday instead of eight hours.

The nonunion stevedore company that was loading and unloading Nardona's ships, and brought in the 20 scabs, is suing Riley, 26 other union officials and members of the local for \$1.5 million in damages. The two locals have offered to settle out of court by giving the company a sum of money without admitting guilt. The company has turned down the offer.

Global production has placed enormous pressures on shipping corporations to reduce labor costs. The Port of Charleston is the second largest on the East Coast and has therefore become a focal point for companies to dramatically lower wages and benefits. The decision of the attorney general to prosecute the case against the Charleston Five shows that there is a section of the political representatives of big business that has decided that obtaining major concessions from the union is not enough. They are clearly seeking to bust the unions in a state that is already less than 4 percent unionized.

The state authorities are also notorious for their racism, as is evidenced by their decision to continue flying the Confederate flag in the state capital despite numerous protests. The membership of Local 1422 is more than 99 percent African-American.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit: