

Victory for Charleston Five!

By DAVID BERNT

The international campaign to free five victimized dockworkers ended with a victory just before the beginning of their Nov. 13 trial.

The dockworkers, known as the Charleston Five, had been charged with "inciting a riot" in connection with a Jan. 21, 1999, incident.

The Charleston Five are members of International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) Local 1422, which represents employees of Nordana a lines in Charleston, S.C. In late 1998, Nordana began using non-union workers to load their ships. To protest the use of non-union dockworkers, the local set up informational picket lines-which successfully delayed two Nordana ships.

After several months, on Jan. 20, 1999, the South Carolina government responded by sending in 600 police to "protect" non-union workers working on a Nordana ship. Early in the morning of Jan. 21, a fight broke out, which many people who were there say the police provoked. The South Carolina attorney general issued felony charges against the Charleston Five and threatened, "jail, jail, and more jail" for them. The five workers were put under house arrest until their case was to be heard.

The charges were a naked attack on the right of workers to picket and mobilize in defense of their jobs. The charges were also politically and racially motivated. The dockworkers are almost exclusively Black in this former Confederate state, and ILA Local 1422 was a key participant in the campaign to remove the racist Confederate flag from the state capitol of South Carolina.

In response, an international labor defense campaign was launched. Local 1422 President Ken Riley toured the country and visited European dockworkers to build solidarity for their campaign. The AFL-CIO, several international unions, and labor councils across the country endorsed the defense campaign.

In June of this year, 5000 trade unionists and supporters marched on the state capitol in Columbia to demand that the Charleston Five be freed.(See July issue of Socialist Action.)

As a result of the pressure of the international campaign, the attorney general was forced to withdraw the charges and the house arrest was lifted.

The longshoremen pleaded no contest to misdemeanor charges-which means they admitted no guilt-and paid a token fine of \$100 each. The state government had no choice but to back down in the face of tremendous union solidarity across the U.S. and around the world.

Despite the victory, the ILA Local 1422 and several trade unionists in Charleston are still facing a \$1.5 million lawsuit from the scab-contracting agency WSI. This is a blatant attempt by the powers that be in South Carolina to bankrupt the local. The struggle against the racist anti-union politicians is far from over.

In this time of reaction against the rights and liberties of workers, immigrants, students, and all others who fight against the profiteering of the bosses and their allies in the government, the case of the Charleston Five serves as an example of how to fight back in defense of the right to protest.