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Public Employee Press

DC 37 says: "Free the Charleston 5!"

Labor battles racism and union busting on South Carolina docks

By MOLLY CHARBONEAU

Labor is gearing up to defend five South Carolina dockworkers who face jail time after 600 riot-equipped police viciously attacked their peaceful picket line on Jan. 20, 2000.

The DC 37 Delegates Council passed a resolution supporting the Charleston 5 at their May 22 meeting. The DC 37 Executive Board voted June 13 to contribute \$5,000 to their legal defense fund.

The national AFL-CIO, its Campaign for Workers' Rights in South Carolina, a number of state labor federations, and a growing list of unions and community groups are also backing the five longshore workers.

Members of Municipal Hospital Employees Local 420, led by President James Butler, and other locals traveled overnight to Columbia, S.C., where they marched on June 9 with more than 4,000 union and community activists from around the U.S. to defend the Charleston 5.

The five members of International Longshoremen's Association Locals 1422 and 1771, are charged with felony "riot" for demonstrating against an attempt to replace them with lower-paid, non-union stevedores.

Right-wing Republican State Attorney General Charles Condon says he wants "jail, jail and more jail" for these unionists, who have stood up for labor and civil rights in a state where only 3.8 percent of workers have unions. Just days before police attacked them on the docks, the longshore workers joined in a march of 47,000 to demand that the state remove the Confederate flag from its capitol.

"We are under oppression in the worst kind of way," ILA Local 1422 President Ken Riley told the DC 37 Delegates Council in May. Mr. Riley, who is African American, showed a large scar on his head where police had clubbed him. "These men have been under house arrest for 15 months, unable to leave their homes except for work or union events, which strains their family life," he stated.

"When we heard the bad news about these dockworkers and the charges they are facing, we decided to get on the Freedom Bus — destination South Carolina — to show our solidarity," said Mr. Butler at the rally.

AFSCME Secretary Treasurer William Lucy also spoke, representing the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson sent a strong message to union-busters in Charleston, saying "We know what you're up to, and you're not going to get away with it."

Local 2627 President Ed Hysyk, who represents electronic data processing personnel, learned about the case from local Recording Secretary Gary Goff. "This case is very important for labor, because South Carolina brags about being the least unionized state and keeping it that way," said Mr. Hysyk, who met Charleston dockworkers during his annual Army Reserve training. "Local 1422 members, who are mostly African American, represent the jobs with opportunity and good pay that unions can bring," he added.

The five dockworkers also have international support. The 5-million-member International Transport Workers' Federation of 570 transportation unions in 132 countries has promised actions and work stoppages at ports worldwide on the opening day of their trial.

Individual donations to the defense fund can be sent to the AFL-CIO Campaign for Workers' Rights in South Carolina, P.O. Box 21777, Charleston, SC 29413. For more information, call 803-798-8300.