

of the low-wage, relatively skilled labor in these largely right-to-work states. Among the biggest offenders in this new phase of globalization are the German and Japanese automakers, including BMW, Honda, Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, and Toyota. As ILA Local 1422 President Ken Riley told *EIR*, “South Carolina is truly like a Third World country.” Fewer than 4% of South Carolina workers are organized into unions, and the average wage is 20% below the national average.

Interview: Ken Riley

Ken Riley is president of International Longshoremen’s Association Local 1422, with 850 members in Charleston, S.C. Mr. Riley spoke with Marianna Wertz on May 10.

EIR: I understand there’s a big demonstration planned on June 9.

Riley: Yes, it’s going to be in Columbia, S.C., the state capital. . . . A trial date has not yet been set. But those of us who have been building the defense campaign, felt it necessary not to just wait, but we wanted to send a message to South Carolina, that we’re not going to tolerate our workers being abused in this fashion, and we’re calling on the state to drop the charges against these five men.

EIR: Can you give us some background on this case?

Riley: The background on this particular case started with a non-union ship, Nordana Lines, that we had done the work for, for 23 years. They decided they were going to go non-union, for reasons unbeknownst to us. We thought, at first, that that was the crux of the issue. But we are finding out now, after the fact, that it was a much broader conspiracy.

But to deal with just the work-related issues: We knew we had performed great work for this company, and we had no idea that there was something going on. The company that Nordana had contracted to do this work is WSI, which is a stevedoring company that uses non-ILA workers at rates that completely undermine the industry standards that we have built up for so long. We’ve always said that we do not mind competition, as long as it’s fair competition. But to exploit the workers in South Carolina and to pit workers against workers, paying these workers a mere \$8 an hour, without any benefits whatsoever, in an industry like the one in which we work, is something way out of range; we could not ever compete with anything like that. . . .

It’s a very dangerous industry and a lot of us have the battle scars to show; some have even lost their lives. You can lose your life out there very, very quickly. It’s fast-moving. Charleston is the most productive port in all North America, and really second only to Hong Kong in the world.

So, it’s very fast-paced, and for workers to be brought into this industry in 2000, at \$8 an hour—when I entered the industry 24 years ago, in 1977, I started at \$8.60. These workers, 24 years later, are making 60¢ less than I made in 1977.

EIR: What’s the average wage for a union dockworker today?

Riley: The average wage for a union worker in Charleston now is \$25 an hour.

EIR: That’s a living wage.

Riley: Yes. Plus benefits: up to 16 paid holidays, up to six weeks vacation; we have excellent retirement benefits, and also excellent health care. Our fringe package is more than the workers at WSI make.

So, we had to let the public know what issues we had with this operation, and the fact that it was going to have an adverse effect on the entire economy. They were taking one of the few industries in South Carolina that can afford to pay the kind of wages on which you can sustain a good living and send your kids to college, and it was about to begin to deteriorate.

We began our pickets, and had done so successfully for at least three of those vessels, before the state attorney general got involved and convened what he called a law enforcement summit—and, I think, three such summits—where he met with heads of police jurisdictions around the state, in order to build up a contingent of 600 cops, to come down and crush that demonstration. . . .

EIR: That was back in January 2000?

Riley: That’s correct, Jan. 20. It gave him the opportunity to try out the new riot gear that was bought, in anticipation of some Y2K disturbance. So therefore, there was a massive build-up right there in front of our union hall, which is only about 150 yards away from the terminal entrance. Actually, it looked like a war zone. Our folks went down to the picket lines that night and were met with these forces, and they became very aggressive. They started to push these guys back and a conflict ensued.

EIR: I understand they had armored vehicles, police patrol boats, and helicopters.

Riley: And snipers on the roof, horseback, canines, you name it. Prior to that time, there had not been any violence or any type of mass disturbance. I think what happened was that we got used, so to speak. On that third vessel call, our guys wanted to go down to the docks, to let the workers see what they were doing to other workers, so they could read our signs, because they were busing them in through the back gates, and with police permission. The local authorities, with whom we’ve had a pretty good working relationship, they allowed our guys to go down to the docks, not to

confront the workers, but to stay a decent distance away, let them see the signs and what was going on.

Mind you, we cannot even have banners or posters that are on sticks. All our banners have to be held by hand, so there were no weapons or anything like that.

The Ports Authority overreacted, ordered the ship to sail, leaving some of the cargo on the dock. I guess that gave them the excuse to bring in the attorney general. That night, they arrested nine men. I myself got clubbed on the head and a lot of guys were shot with rubber bullets.

We got these guys out of jail and the state attorney general came in, reinstated the charges, upped the charges to felony charges that carry a penalty of up to five years. We went to preliminary hearings in Federal District Court, and the charges were thrown out. They didn't prove anything against any of these guys. But the attorney general didn't stop there. He went to the grand jury. As my attorney always used to say, you can indict a bunny rabbit in a grand jury, because there's no defense. So he got an indictment for three of them, and offered a reward to anyone in the public who would come out and identify anyone who, just having been there, could be indicted, for participating in a "riot."

They then got two more guys, and they placed these guys under house arrest, and they've been that way since January 2000. . . .

[Attorney General] Charles Condon—he is a political animal. He is now running for governor. I think he's catering to the state Chamber [of Commerce], because right now, in South Carolina, it's all about being big business.

All the foreign capital, the German investments and so forth, the BMWs and the Michelin tires and all these big plants, are coming to the upper state. Their main objective, and their reason for coming to South Carolina in the first place, is because we are being marketed as the most productive workers in the world, who, by the way, earn 20-26% less than the national average. . . .

[This] is the strongest right-to-work state in the country. That's why South Carolina has pretty much the lowest union density of the 50 states.

EIR: It's where George Bush became famous for standing up for the Confederate flag, isn't it?

Riley: Right. All this came about at the same time. Charlie Condon was Bush's campaign chairman in South Carolina, and he used this particular incident, that happened on the docks, in his ad in promoting George Bush.

EIR: Is your local largely black and Hispanic?

Riley: My local is predominantly black. We only have two whites in our membership, who came in pretty much around the same time I did. . . .

[Ours] are by far the best-paying jobs for African-Americans in the state. I'm sure you may find someone who may have made their way to a top executive position, or whatever,

here and there, but as far as the common blue-collar worker, I don't think anyone in the state makes more than we do.

EIR: Places where it used to be the case that African-Americans could make that kind of living are shutting down, in the Midwest, in steel and auto, and . . . moving into the South.

Riley: Absolutely. They say that the hottest industrial belt in the country is along the Interstate-85 corridor, which extends from Atlanta, Georgia to Greensboro, North Carolina. There's so much German investment in that area, they now call it the "*autobahn*" [which means "highway" in German].

EIR: That's part of the "Southern Strategy" of the Republicans.

Riley: Sure. And that's why we were saying to Bill Fletcher [the AFL-CIO representative working with the Charleston 5], plants are closing up in these heavily unionized states and moving to South Carolina, so, it's time the AFL-CIO turns its attention to the South.

That's the message we're telling all our union brothers and sisters when we go around the country. I can remember going to San Francisco and the president there called the name of a particular plant and he said to them, "You remember this plant, where we had about 500 workers? That plant closed down, all of us remember that. But do you know where that plant relocated? In South Carolina, and that's why we have to get behind this campaign and fight. Because, if we do not bring South Carolina up to par with the rest of the country, we're going to have more and more of our jobs going there." . . .

South Carolina is truly like a Third World country. We have launched a campaign to organize those dockworkers that took our jobs for five months back in 2000. In meeting with them, we're hearing the kinds of things that happened to them on the job, and how when they've made 30 hours, they lay them off until the next week so they can't get overtime. We have some of those things actually documented. We are going to organize that outfit and we've got a very good campaign going on now. So we're not backing up, we are moving forward.

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