



On the Global Waterfront: The Fight to Free the Charleston 5

Suzan Erem, E. Paul Durrenberger

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Longshoremen stand at the nexus of the global economy, handling nearly every cargo container that enters or leaves any country. Even in the face of cargo “containerization” in the 70s and 80s, a development that decimated longshore unions, they have managed to win contracts that provide health benefits and high wages.

On the Global Waterfront tells the story of how longshoremen in South Carolina confronted attempts to wipe out the state’s most powerful black organization. When a Danish shipping company began to shift their transportation to a nonunion firm in 1999, Local 1422 in Charleston, South Carolina, mobilized to protect their hard-won rights. What followed culminated in a protest in which 660 riot police were deployed against fifty dockworkers, a group that grew to 150 before the night was over. Four black and one white longshoreman — subsequently known as the Charleston 5 — were held for twenty months under house arrest on trumped-up felony charges of inciting a riot.

Within the politically conservative, racially charged, and intensely religious climate of the South, the unassuming local union president, Ken Riley — supported behind the scenes by a militant AFL-CIO staffer — crafted an international, grassroots campaign in defense of the arrested longshoremen. From Australia to Europe to Korea to the entire west coast of the United States, longshoremen threatened to shut down ports jeopardizing billions of dollars in trade per day. Their ultimate success vaulted Riley, and his reform-minded coworkers, to higher leadership in a notoriously corrupt union, and laid the foundation for successful rebuffs in ports around the world. **On the Global Waterfront** explores in detail a local conflict and in the process exposes the powers that rule the United States and the global economy. This compelling narrative of a local struggle, a transformed union leader, and a newly energized international worker movement highlights the resounding importance of the international labor movement that is not only still vital, but still capable of stopping global commerce on a dime.

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