

USA: Chronicle of a Labor Victory

Tuesday 7 December 2010 (Date first published: 1 November 2010).

Review of Freda Coodin *On the Global Waterfront. The Fight to Free the Charleston 5* by Suzan Erem and E. Paul Durrenberger, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008, 240 pages, \$17.95 paper.

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"You're not gonna have huggin' and kissin' and glad-to-meet ya's." —Leonard Riley [[1](#)]

MOST UNION MEMBERS see nothing but hugging and kissing between their leaders and their bosses on a daily basis. It takes a different kind of union to break with this culture, which has become second-nature to U.S. unions and is arguably the main reason for their current weakness. Leonard Riley's longshore workers union in Charleston, South Carolina is a different kind of union, however, and *On the Global Waterfront* by Suzan Erem and Paul Durrenberger tells their gripping story.

In a blow-by-blow account [[2](#)], Erem and Durrenberger describe the events that led to a police provocation against a picket protesting non-union work on January 19, 2001. It became an inspiring campaign that beat back three sets of attackers: renegade companies, a powerful port authority trying to convince customers that the longshore union could be stopped from making trouble and an attorney general who thought that by destroying the lives of the Charleston 5 — four Black and one white dockworker — he would win the race for governor.

The story of the Charleston 5 has a little bit of something for everyone — a racialized political establishment in the state with an extremely low unionization rate, Southern religious dynamics, one of the oldest Black dockworkers' unions, a militant rank-and-file and democratically led union, and aggressive corporations. Most importantly, it's a story in which the good folks win.

Defending Union Jobs

The authors tell this story with many details and at a compelling pace. There were three union locals involved. ILA Local 1422 is the biggest and oldest local in Charleston. It represents the men and women — 98% Black — who work primarily on container ships. ILA Local 1422-A is a racially mixed

local of mechanics and ILA 1771 represents the clerks who track the cargo. They are primarily white workers. All the ILA locals had organized picketing against Nordana, a small Danish shipping company which had, since fall 2000, replaced ILA labor with non-union labor to work its ships in Charleston.

But in the days before the January 19 arrival of another Nordana ship, the South Carolina Port Authority (SPA) requested at least 200 law enforcement officers from multiple agencies to protect a dozen or so non-union workers. They wanted the “skirmishes” from previous pickets to end; the previous Nordana ship had left with work incomplete because some 20-40 ILA longshore workers had “boarded the ship through its ro-ro [roll-on, roll-off] ramp, stood in the hold for a few minutes to make their point, and walked off.” (45) The acting chief of the SPA’s police, Lindy Rinaldi, wrote in a memorandum after that incident, “I feel that law enforcement may be faced with the possibility of having to use lethal action.”

On January 19, when the ILA workers decided to go down to the docks to picket the unloading of the next Nordana ship, 660 police officers had massed. They had helicopters, police dogs, mounted police, police in riot gear, a communication center, snipers, and whatever else it takes to oversee what had been, until that day, pickets of at most two dozen workers.

After consulting with the other presidents and talking with the members, who were arriving in large numbers at the union hall, Local 1422 president Ken Riley announced the plan to do nothing and act as if they had called off the picket. The police would stand down and then, at midnight, workers would assemble again “and we’ll decide whether to do it again. It’s cold. It’s wet. Let’s keep them spending money all night.” (22, *italics in original*).

Provocation

Unfortunately someone informed the police of the plan and they began harassing members. By midnight, members were so riled up that they convinced the union presidents to march down to the docks.

What follows is history. Workers fought to maintain their power despite the odds, and the police pushed back on behalf of the bosses. With great effort, solid union members convinced co-workers to withdraw. But, as they were leaving — this was video-taped and well described by Erem and Durrenberger — the police attacked with guns.

“The street was clear and the gap between their backs and the police line widened...They had made their point and it was time to go home...The longshoremen didn’t notice what the video camera showed—how in the dark and distance the police line suddenly re-formed and tightened up...Six officers at the front of the police line lifted their rifles to their shoulders, aimed and started shooting.” (145-146)

Although many were wounded and some, like Ken Riley, were singled out and beaten purposefully, no one was killed.

Fighting on Many Fronts

The next morning, and in the months that followed, the media attacked the union “thugs” and covered the event as a “riot.” A local Charleston judge charged the ILA members arrested that night with misdemeanor trespassing, and although all the men were quickly released on bond, South

Carolina Attorney General Charlie Condon put out a press release with a plan for dealing with this union “violence:” “Jail, jail and more jail.” (59)

After a few rounds in court, Condon won grand jury indictments against Ricky Simmons, Elijah Ford, Ken Jefferson, Jason Edgerton and Peter Washington. They were charged with felonies for conspiracy to riot, given bail ranging from \$35,000 to \$150,000, and were placed under house arrest from 7pm to 7am, only free to leave for work, church and union meetings.

But that wasn’t the extent of the huge legal battle now facing ILA Locals 1422 and 1771. They had to figure out how to convince Nordana to resume using union labor. At the same time, the non-union stevedoring company that had supplied labor for Nordana was also suing the two locals for alleged financial losses.

Despite the Odds

The locals couldn’t count on their very own union, the International Longshoremen’s Association, which is infamous because of its relationship to organized crime and its overpaid, old-guard, do-nothing bureaucracy. Getting ILA support took over a year of backdoor political maneuvering at the highest levels of the AFL-CIO.

The longshore locals in Charleston had to figure out how to raise massive amounts of money, how to mount strategic legal and media campaigns, and how reach out to the rest of the labor movement and whoever else might support their cause. It was 2001, when the Bush revolution seemed all-encompassing and, after 9/11, a general malaise descended upon all social movements, not the least on the increasingly weak and retreating unions.

South Carolina is second only to North Carolina for the lowest unionization rate in the country. As the book’s authors belabor, upstate conservative Christian politics were dominant within the entrenched white establishment. As labor journalist David Bacon reported, Condon repeatedly claimed that his issue with the longshore workers was based on the need to protect South Carolina’s right-to-work laws, “and a citizen’s right not to join a union is absolute and will be fully respected.”

Capital had a plan for the Carolinas, and no group of workers could be allowed to disrupt that plan. Bacon notes: “...[C]ompanies are settling in the Carolinas, and particularly along the I-85 corridor. We have to think about the strategic importance of the I-85 corridor, which extends from Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina down into Georgia. That’s where industrial development in the South is taking place, and therefore an area with great potential for organizing.” [3]

It was clear from the beginning that the real issue for the South Carolina political establishment was that Ken Riley’s local — made up of Black workers no less — had a strategy to take on the abusive political climate towards workers in South Carolina.

Throughout *On the Global Waterfront* the authors outline the key moments that turned this classic battle between labor and capital (with significant help from the state) into a labor victory. They describe the union raising money, putting a savvy legal team in place, analyzing its own strengths and weaknesses, strategizing over which key tactical goals they needed to focus on, planning and coordinating their strategy, building coalitions with other unions and community groups both in the United States and internationally, and getting out a strong message through the media.

Militant and Democratic

The authors successfully identify what makes a real fightback successful: militant vision, membership involvement (which requires strong leadership and democratic local union structures) and coalition-building.

However, I felt the most important conclusion was missing: key to a fighting labor movement is rank-and-file unionism. I would even argue that it is because ILA Local 1422 in Charleston was a rank-and-file militant and democratic union that the port authority set into motion the wheels for the January 19 confrontation and that explains why the attorney general consequently decided to go after the union so harshly. [4]

But the vision of rank-and-file militant unionism isn't explored in great depth in *On the Global Waterfront*. Nor is the Longshore Workers' Coalition, co-founded by Ken Riley a few years after he became president of his local. Yet it was this coalition that created a larger reform movement within the ILA. The LWC network of rank-and-file ILA members and leaders gave hope to the Charleston locals, yet the authors only refer to the LWC to explain how its existence made it harder for the Charleston locals to get the support of the ILA.

Dan La Botz describes in detail many of the elements that make Local 1422 a radically different kind of union.(5) For example, Ken Riley built a strike fund because he wanted his local to have real power to negotiate solid local contracts; this sounds logical, but many unions don't have a strike fund and can't back up a strike threat.

Riley found ways to keep his membership informed. One of his officers, or he himself, speaks with the members every morning before they are hired.

A group of elected and unelected leaders within the local constantly seek potential new leaders. As Leonard Riley explained to La Botz: 'We start to see if a person's a self-starter, if he employs common sense, if he's a hustler...then you look how he handles the social structure out there, whether he's concerned about what goes on. You invite him to a meeting because, you tell him, he needs to be well-rounded. If he starts to come to the meetings that gives you another dimension of that person.'

The local also features a junior executive board and suggests that potential leaders get a formal education by finishing high school or taking college classes. In addition to these leadership-building strategies, the local attempts to foster democratic decision-making by allowing local members to attend district-level grievance hearings despite the fact that the ILA would rather not see rank-and-file members at those meetings.

Because of these strategies, this local union is still a key builder of the LWC ten years after the success that *On the Global Waterfront* details. Of course it is still struggling to maintain itself as a militant rank-and-file union, and it sometimes doesn't achieve its goal. For example, at the tenth anniversary victory celebration of the Charleston 5, in February 2010, outside guests outnumbered ILA members.

Class and the Left

Erem and Durrenberger's main framework for understanding the political context of the Charleston 5 struggle is the neoliberal revolution that Bush and Co. helped deepen dramatically as this story was taking place. They focus heavily on the religious politics that are such an omnipresent part of

South Carolina's political landscape.

But they are short on exploring the role of the organized left. While they mention the campaign gratefully accepted help from everyone, regardless of political orientation—and despite criticism for doing so — at times they disparage the left, saying it was “long on analysis but short on funding.” (169) This is nothing but short-sighted. They rightfully applaud the role of key actors like Bill Fletcher, but don't point out (conveniently?) that he is a prominent and well-published leftist.

Erem and Durrenberger argue that class consciousness in this country has been watered down because of the shift in national politics from economic values to emotional ones because of the above-mentioned Christian revolution. However, as they admit themselves, “Black longshoremen never suffered from this delusion because they were always alienated from a racist political and social system, were able to isolate their good fortune in the union...They are buoyed by churches that more often than not preach community over individuality.” (185)

The authors describe the Charleston longshore workers as religious people who don't drink or swear — labels intended, it seems, to distance them from “blue-collar workers.” It's true that a lot of the men and women have well-paying jobs and own homes or small businesses; many went to college and are sending their kids to college. Their lifestyles are what people call “middle class.”

But this definition of class is quite limited. The working-class consciousness of the Charleston longshore workers, their commitment to their union and maintaining its power on the job every single day, is not the result of isolation from oppressive and conservatizing political structures but the result of a long history of class consciousness forged through the work they have always done on the docks, which led them to understand very early on the social relations of production. In fact, they are one of the first Black longshore unions in the country, formed in 1869.

Howard Zinn, in a short article published the day after the police attacked the Charleston longshore workers, wrote about how Black workers, often prevented from joining unions with white workers in the years following the Civil War, organized themselves into unions in the ports of Baltimore, Savannah, Charleston and New Orleans. He remarked, “So the struggle for justice and equality goes back a long way.”(6)

This group of Black workers has remained solidly class conscious because they have a strong democratic union. Other workers are indeed losing their class consciousness — because their unions are either completely powerless or because they don't have a union and the labor movement is not capable of organizing them.

Thanks to Suzan Erem and Paul Durrenberger, we can see the real possibilities for union victories even in an international union known for corruption. We can see an example of a local union of Black workers in the South trying to establish traditions of democracy and strong leadership. *On the Global Waterfront* tells a story that can give us hope even amidst the immense challenges of today's economy and political climate.

Freda Coodin

P.S.

* From *Against the Current*, November/December 2010, No. 149.

Footnotes

[1] Joann Wypijewski, "Audacity on Trial," *The Nation*, July 26, 2001.

[2] Extended breaks on the docks in some ports are called "blows."

[3] # David Bacon, "The Charleston Five. South Carolina declares war on unions," *In These Times*, October 1, 2001.

[4] Only once do the authors actually allow the word sabotage to creep into the story. I am sure that they fought the lawyers on that one statement alone, although maybe not because the authors were clearly condemning the fact that "the protest wasn't going to die down and, worse, somebody was willing to stoop to sabotage to win this war," (Erem and Durrenberger, 45) The lawyers probably insisted on the following endnote too: "The union's position is that ILA Local 1422 could not and did not organize, endorse or participate in the events that followed [e.g. sabotage, FC] as an organization, though its rank and file members may have," (Ibid, 203, endnote 15). While I respect good lawyers defending militant workers, I would also want to be able to openly discuss (and be proud of) how workers often have no choice but to go to such lengths in their fights with employers.