



Unity Council

September 19, 2005

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Brazilian Metalworkers Pledge Solidarity with US's Gerdau Workers

When Pete Savoy and Phil Everett of Local 8586 in Beaumont went to Brazil to meet with leaders and members of Brazilian metalworkers' unions, they never expected to be taking part in a demonstration outside Gerdau's flagship plant in São Leopoldo with 500 Gerdau employees supporting their cause.

That's just one of their experiences during an 11-day trip to Gerdau's homeland, where the company has 14 production facilities.

Savoy and Everett were accompanied by Melinda Newhouse of the USW Strategic Campaigns department, who helped arrange meetings with the leaders of unions representing more than 49 million Brazilian workers.

Organizers of the demonstration drove a speaker truck up to the plant gate and blocked the road. The U.S. unionists were initially startled by this move.

"If we did this at home, we'd all be arrested," Newhouse said.

"A few years ago, we would have been arrested too," one of Brazil's union leaders told her.

The demonstration went on for about two hours. Foremen were sitting in their cars, lined up to enter the plant. No horns sounded. Nobody seemed impatient to get into the plant. Workers' rights are given wide latitude in Brazil. Gerdau management got a "loud and clear" message of support for the steelworkers locked out in Beaumont, Texas.

Things have changed dramatically for Brazilian workers with the awakening of the labor movement during the 1970s and 80s in a struggle against the military dictatorship. On Jan. 1, 2003, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party was elected president of Brazil.

The South American nation is moving rapidly into the global economy and trade union leaders understand the need to form alliances with unions in other nations. They understand global solidarity, both when they are seeking help and when they are asked to give help.

Savoy, Everett and Newhouse were warmly welcomed throughout their travels in Brazil.

They met with João Felício, President of CUT (pronounced coot), the union representing some 37 million workers, and Paulo Pereira da Silva, President, CNMT-Forca Sindical, another major union representing 12 million workers.

Wherever they went, they told the story of the Beaumont lockout and the failure of Gerdau's U.S. executives to treat American steelworkers with dignity and respect.

In Osasco they met with officials and members of the regional metalworkers' union, who pledged their support of Gerdau workers represented by the USW.

In Cumbica, they joined members of the FS in a demonstration at the Gerdau plant there.

They spent two days in São Paulo, meeting with representatives of all Gerdau unions in Brazil. Both sides listened, learned and offered perspectives on what we can do together to confront Gerdau.

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With assistance from the CUT, the USW delegation also met with elected political leaders who have influence with the Gerdau Company, including Ricardo Berzoini, the recently elected president of the Workers Party, and Luiz Marinho, the Minister of Labor.

In Porto Alegre, they met Federal Congressman Marco Maia and with State Congressman Adão Vilaverde, who later contacted Jorge Gerdau on behalf of the USW.

Gerdau has gotten the message. "Respect your American steelworkers and deal with them fairly at the negotiating table. Their cause is just and Brazilian workers are standing, shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity."