

Minnesota Steelworkers Get Help In Their Contract Fight

By Barb Kucera, Workday Minnesota

SOUTH ST. PAUL — Steelworkers at the former North Star Steel mill in St. Paul have been without a new contract since Aug. 1. So this week, they are enlisting the support of their counterparts in Brazil – and the local community through a unique "blimp" campaign.

Brazilian union leaders Nair Goulart and Fernando Lopes joined Steelworkers from the United States and Canada at a Unity Conference Monday in South St. Paul. All of them work at steel facilities owned by Gerdau, a multinational based in Brazil.

Lopes is general secretary of the CNM/CUT, a metalworkers union representing nine Gerdau plants in Brazil. Goulart is a representative of the CNTM, another metalworkers union representing workers at eight Brazilian Gerdau facilities. They told the U.S. and Canadian workers that they, too, had to struggle to maintain their rights. After a series of strikes and community campaigns, the Brazilian unions and Gerdau have "a relationship of mutual respect," Lopes said.

Gerdau, started more than 100 years ago in Brazil, began expanding internationally 25 years ago. It is now the second-largest mini-mill steel producer and long steel producer in North America.

In 2004, it acquired the assets of North Star Steel, including plants in St. Paul; Wilton, Iowa; and Beaumont, Texas. Since then, the St. Paul and Iowa workers have seen their contracts expire and negotiations drag on, while the Texas workers faced a lockout – then were forced back to work under terms and conditions unilaterally implemented by the company.

"This is a company that has made millions of dollars in the first year of takeover," said Mike Wodaszewski, president of Local 7263, which represents the 350 workers at the St. Paul plant. "All we're asking for is a fair contract."



Brazilian union leaders Nair Goulart (above, left) and Fernando Lopes (center) joined USW Local 7263 President Mike Wodaszewski and other U.S. and Canadian Steelworkers this week to show support.

St. Paul Union Advocate photos

Wodaszewski said the management at Gerdau Ameristeel wants to gut wages and benefits and "are attacking about all the language in our contract."

The proposed cuts include:

- ◆ A two-tier wage structure in which new hires would make \$2.50 an hour less for doing the same job.
- ◆ Wage freezes for as long as four years for about half the plant's workers.
- ◆ Cuts in overtime pay, vacation and profit-sharing and elimination of supplemental employment benefits.

The Unity Conference is an opportunity to show the company "that this union will reach overseas if needed to reach an equitable contract," he said.



**This traveling billboard is carrying the USW's message around the Twin Cities.
St. Paul Union Advocate photos**

The union also is reaching out to the community via a traveling "street blimp" – essentially a moving billboard. It features a photo of a crocodile opening its mouth and the message: "Gerdau devoured North Star Steel; Now it's after our standard of living."

The union parked the blimp near the St. Paul plant Monday afternoon, then planned to drive it around the metro area throughout the week, said staffer Kevin Fahey.

"The biggest problem here (in the United States) is there are plants that are organized and some that are unorganized," said Brazilian union leader Goulart. "They are going to try to bring everyone down to the bottom."

Along with the current contract fight, the USW must focus on organizing Gerdau's non-union plants in the United States, she and Lopes said.

As more and more workers are employed by transnational corporations, international solidarity becomes more important, they said. Brazilian union leaders visited Gerdau facilities in Minnesota, Texas and Florida last August and the locked-out workers from Beaumont, Texas, went to Brazil, where they garnered a great deal of media attention.

This article includes information reported by St. Paul Union Advocate editor Michael Kuchta.