



Unity Council

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– Bill Clevenger

3 Contracts Ratified but Fight Continues

The good news is that labor agreements have been ratified by our members at Beaumont, Texas; St. Paul, Minn.; and Wilton, Iowa. The plants had been owned by North Star Steel before being acquired by Gerdau in 2004. More good news is that workers at all Gerdau plants are maintaining strong solidarity to win agreements at all locations where contracts are not yet settled.

“Negotiations with Gerdau Ameristeel have been drawn out and contentious,” said the USW’s chief negotiator Jim Stewart. “But the company made significant movement on important issues during the past few weeks allowing us to achieve agreements that were approved by our members at all three locations.”

The bargaining committees comprised of local union representatives accepted the tentative agreements and sent them to the membership for discussion and ratification votes that were held at each location concluding on March 8. Union members at each location were required to approve or reject a contract for their own location.

Gerdau made commitments to the USW that the ratification of these three contracts would lead to positive and meaningful movement at the other open tables. The remaining Gerdau Ameristeel locations still in contract negotiations are Whitby, Ontario; Joliet, Ill., Sand Springs, Okla., and Calvert City, Ky.

Solidarity works

“These agreements would not have been possible without support of workers at all Gerdau plants,” said Local 8586 President Pete Savoy. “We want to be sure and let all those who are still bargaining contracts know that they have the full support of steelworkers in Beaumont.”

Gerdau locked out its employees in Beaumont for six months in what proved to be an embarrassing blunder and ill-fated strategy to break the union in 2005.

“Gerdau admitted its mistake and called us back to work,” Savoy said. “It still took the company another year to

get the message that we were not going to settle for a concessionary agreement. The contract we just ratified is a fair contract and the one we deserved in the first place.”

Looking ahead

“The workers in Beaumont sacrificed for all of us,” said Local 7263 President Mike Wodaszewski at St. Paul. “We got together and formed this Unity Council back in ’99. We’ve learned how to work together and stick together and that’s what we did. Nothing is more powerful than workers’ solidarity and our success proves that.”

Bill Clevenger, president of Local 8581 at Wilton agreed, saying, “Now the focus is on the Locals still bargaining. “It’s important that they know we are standing in solidarity with them. We formed the Unity Council to increase our power at the bargaining table. The assistance of the International Union and the relationships we’ve established with unions representing Gerdau’s workers in other countries were immeasurable in weighing in on these victories.”

Local unions at all Gerdau Ameristeel’s North America locations have been active in the Unity Council where communications and exchange of ideas and information have helped build solidarity among the workers, They are committed to supporting each other in every way necessary to insure fair and equitable contracts at all locations.

“The Unity Council’s incredible and continued demonstration of solidarity, for the past two years of bargaining, and our unyielding determination have moved us to this point,” Stewart said. “The rank and file members continued support for the difficult work has been phenomenal and the continued support for each other will see us to a conclusion that is fair and equitable for every member in every location.”

While we’ve made some progress at other tables, bargaining continues at Whitby and Calvert City. Negotiators return to the table March 13 at Joliet. There are no firm dates set for Sand Springs but the company is expected to revamp its wage proposal in preparation for the resumption of talks.