

**THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST**

**Killing A River, Kill Our Livelihoods: A Brazilian Community Fights for Survival**

**Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director**

**Guest: Carmen Foro, Secretary-General, Central Union of Workers in Brazil (CUT)**

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Hi, this is Shawna Bader-Blau, host of the Solidarity Center Podcast. I wanted to share an update on and a great victory for the Brazilian community we featured here last year. When a huge waterway project from the Brazilian government meant blasting and dredging a key section of a tropical wetlands in South America, labor leaders joined with community activists to stand up to the Brazilian government and demand an end to the project that threatened the livelihoods of indigenous people that are dependent on the river. The Brazilian Public Prosecutor's office has now suspended the project's license, citing the absence of prior consultation with the communities that could be impacted, especially indigenous communities, and the lack of information on the effects of the project on the community.

This is a huge achievement, which happened because union leaders like Carmen Foro and other labor activists led a broad coalition of community members, fishers, family farmers, youth, women and Colombo community groups raised awareness about the negative impacts of the waterway construction and campaigned to end the project which they viewed as potentially leading to environmental destruction on jobs and communities. This process is not over. There will still be a negotiation to reach a resolution, but suspension of the project is truly a victory for the Riverside communities and for the democratic process.

Now let's hear from Carmen Foro, a rural activist, former Secretary General of the Central Union of Workers of Brazil, and now part of the federal government in the Ministry of Women. Carmen describes the struggle in this April 2022 episode.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Hello sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the Executive Director of The Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Many of us are rightly concerned about the impact corporations are having on the environment and the resulting degradation and climate crisis we see unfolding around us. And for many workers, especially marginalized workers, the crisis is here, now. Flooding, drought, and extreme weather events are pushing workers to migrate, often in low wage jobs, under dangerous conditions. Workers in highly polluting industries face the dual impacts of occupational health and safety hazards and environmental degradation. I could talk more about the effects of the climate crisis on these workers and the wrenching harm they suffer because of poor environmental stewardship by corporations and governments. But on this episode, it's more important to hear from someone on the front lines of the crisis. Carmen Foro, union leader from Brazil, is going to tell us what's happening in the Amazon region in Pará state, a dense, lush rainforest, where she was born. Right now, a community that makes its livelihood in the Amazon is standing up to the Brazilian government that, without consulting with the people most affected, is on

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the verge of undertaking a blasting and dredging project along a river waterway that would destroy their livelihoods.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Carmen is deeply invested in her community, where she was a leader in the Rural Workers Union, making the connection between the living environment and the right of workers to support themselves. Carmen is now a Secretary General of the Central Union of Workers in Brazil, or CUT, the largest trade union federation in Brazil and the fifth largest in the world.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Before we start, we've talked a few times on this podcast about C190, the international labor organization treaty to address violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. Today, we're talking about C169, the Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention to protect Indigenous peoples that has technically been in force in Brazil since 2002. When a country like Brazil ratifies C169, it means it must safeguard the natural resources of Indigenous and Tribal lands, including the right of its peoples to participate in the use, management, and conservation of these resources. And one more production note, we're presenting this episode with all of Carmen's original interview in Portuguese. It's a little different than some of our recent episodes, but I think it's important to hear all of the passion and emotion in Carmen's voice as she tells her story, and the story of the Indigenous communities that are being put at risk by corporations as well as the government that should be protecting them.

### **Carmen Foro:**

So, my name is Carmen Foro. I am a family farmer in the State of Pará, which is in the heart of the Amazon, and I am currently Secretary General at the CUT here in Brazil. So, the CUT is a union. It's a

union of unions here in Brazil. It's the largest association of unions in Brazil, and differently from other associations of unions, we have both urban and rural workers in our union, and the Family Farmers represents, actually, thousands and thousands of members within the CUT. And I want to share a little bit about the experience with the caravan. In the region of Tocantins River, we have many infrastructure construction works right now, undergoing both in the energy and also in the transportation and the hydroway transportation sector. So, in the '70s, the second largest hydropower plant was built in this river, the Tocantins River. And as we know, capital plans its construction works to last for hundreds of years. So, now we are seeing the stage of construction of the Araguaia Tocantins Hydroway. What is this hydroway for?

### **Carmen Foro:**

So, what is this hydroway designed for it? Well, it's intention is to transport soy, soybean, and iron ore from the State of Mato Grosso in Brazil into a port called Barcarena, and from this port, the soybean and the iron ore will be exported into the European Union and into Asia. We have nothing against development. However, this hydroway, it brings barges, and these barges, as they go through our river, transporting soy and iron ore, they leave behind a trace of destruction. And to build this hydroway, they will remove, or rather, explode, a region of rocks, which is called Pedral do Lourenço and these rocks have been there for thousands of years. They were created by nature, and these rocks will be exploded throughout a period of three years. So, with three years of explosives in these rocks, there will be no fish

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left, no algae left, no living thing. This river is so important for life in that region that it is sustainable from an economic perspective.

#### **Carmen Foro:**

We have enough fish to be sold, even for other states as well. The Pedral do Lourenço, so this region of rocks, is a touristic spot, and this project will not create not even 1,000 jobs, and I'm even being generous here, and the losses to the regional life aren't calculated. So, as if the explosions in these rock were not enough, in a nearby city, there is a reservoir where we have plenty of fish, and this reservoir will be drained for many years to come. The voice of the local population has not been heard. Convention 169 from the ILO has not been respected. Environmental impact studies show 20 severe problems with the project. Population has no access to information, so we decided to design a project to mobilize and empower local communities. So, we have a website, which is called, [Comunidade Amazônica](#), where you find plenty of information about our project. So, on this website, there's plenty of information, and we've also decided to visit the cities and municipalities that are around the banks of the river.

#### **Carmen Foro:**

So, we've set up this caravan to visit these cities, and this caravan included an amazing diversity of people. We had representatives from the Quilombo population, from fishermen communities, from family farmers, from local youth, women, different grassroots associations, from the health sector, from universities, the Catholic church, and all the also other religions. They were all part of this diverse caravan. And we want our voices to reach different places. We want our voices to reach the state government and the federal government as well, and there is an ongoing dispute for narratives about this specific project. But we are certain of one thing: This project is not good for the local population. And if this project comes to an end, if it's finished, this will actually mean the end of our river.

#### **Carmen Foro:**

So, what we want, we want the future administration to talk to the population, and we want the future administration to give us guarantees on the rights for the future of this river. I want to get old by the banks of this river. I want my children to know that I fought for this river, and that's what I want. I always speak from a very collective perspective. I never have time to speak about myself. I don't know any different experience than the experience of being a local Amazonian person. I know a little bit of other places, because as secretary general of the CUT, I do travel around Brazil, but there's one thing that I do understand, that this fight needs to come from the global perspective to the local perspective, and from the local into the global perspective as well. That's why I really value grassroots work and grassroots movements. So, actually, speaking about me is speaking about all other people. It's a common struggle and a common battle. It's the battle of farmers. It's the battle of women, and this project is a project that might kill all of that.

#### **Carmen Foro:**

And in these rural areas and around the river, we make no difference between these two things. Life just happens. Everyone lives together. Everyone is connected, the fishermen communities, the farmer communities, and our main concern is with the greed of capitalism. We know that if this hydroway is

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constructed, if it's built, then it will bring together with it agribusiness interests, monoculture, land conflicts, pollution, a lack of respect for the populations who live there. The river will essentially be privatized. So, our major challenge is to mobilize local society. We want to have our narrative heard. We want to put pressure on governments. We want to implement 169 Convention from the ILO. We want public policies to preserve the river, and we believe this is the democratic way to build and preserve our rights. This is the way to ensure our future and our life.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Wow, so very powerful. Carmen expressed so beautifully that how we treat the environment impacts workers, their jobs, their communities. When you hear her talk about the Tocantins River, and the ways that corporations, and even the Brazilian government, intend to mistreat and misuse that resource, it becomes clear that workers need to take action, because unchecked greed has fueled environmental destruction and climate change and worsened inequality and eroded worker rights. All of these things are connected, and Carmen shows how workers, through their unions and their communities, must be meaningfully included in decision making. People and the democratic process must come before profits, and no unions on earth do this better than the Brazilians. That diverse movement is the essence of social justice unionism that the Brazilian labor movement brings to the struggle for the environment, and to the fight for democracy and worker rights that they have been leading for decades.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

All people must have the right to a decent life on their own terms, and unions have a critical role to play in advancing this right. The best climate and environmental solutions are those that not only protect the planet but also advance this more just society like the Brazilians are trying to build, and this can only be achieved through this meaningful inclusion that Carmen really represents and is a leader in. Worker justice is connected to climate justice. As in Brazil, workers and their unions worldwide are joining a climate justice movement now, bolstered by their support from and participation in broad-based coalitions as well as long-term experience in people-centered policy and legislative activism and advocacy in their respective countries.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Thank you, sister Carmen, for sharing your incredibly powerful story. I am so deeply moved by your experiences, your passion, your dedication to the people who make their living along the Tocantins River, ensuring they will continue to be able to support themselves there through the life-giving forest, river and land. Your words, your actions, your commitment inspire us all, and a special thanks to our interpreter Beatriz Velloso for helping us to bring this story to our listeners.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at [solidaritycenter.org](https://solidaritycenter.org), and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network, and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.