

Between Soldiers and Bombs

By David Bacon | August 2, 2005

BASRA, IRAQ—The cracking towers and gas flares of the al-Daura oil refinery rise above the neighborhood on Baghdad's outskirts that bears its name. On February 18, Ali Hassan Abd (Abu Fahad), a leader of the refinery's union, was walking home from the Al Daura Refinery with his young children, when gunmen ran up and shot him.

Abu Fahad had been one of 400 union activists who emerged from the underground or returned from exile in May 2003, and at a Baghdad conference formed the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). Afterward, he went back to the refinery and urged his fellow workers to elect department- and plant-wide committees. That, in turn, became a nucleus of the Oil and Gas Workers Union, one of the twelve industry unions that make up the IFTU.

Less than a week after Fahad was killed, on February 24, armed men gunned down Ahmed Adris Abbas in Baghdad's Martyrs' Square. Adris Abbas was an activist in the Transport and Communications Union, another IFTU affiliate. The murder of the two followed the torture and assassination of Hadi Saleh, the IFTU's international secretary, in Baghdad on January 4. Moaid Hamed, general secretary of the IFTU's Mosul branch, was kidnapped in mid-February, as was Talib Khadim Al Tayee, president of the metal and print workers union. Both were later released.

Trade Unionists in the Cross-Hairs

The targeting of trade unionists is a particularly alarming feature of life in occupied Iraq. According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, "the torture and murder of labor leaders in Iraq has become a troubling trend in a country where trade unionists still operate under anti-union legislation which dates back to the Saddam-era."

In February, the British Trades Union Congress brought representatives of the IFTU out of Iraq, along with leaders of other Iraqi labor federations. After a memorial for Saleh, they spent a day describing to British unionists their need for keeping open the political space they need to survive. Then, in June, U.S. Labor Against the War brought a group of six Iraqi trade union leaders to the United States.

Hassan Juma'a, head of the General Union of Oil Employees at Iraq's huge oil installations in the south, predicts that "an attack on myself will take place, but I'm not afraid. I expect the terrorists will strike everywhere." Juma'a, like most Iraqi unionists, attributes the murder of Saleh and other leaders to remnants of Saddam's secret police, the old Mukhabharat. "They seem to be able to operate freely," he said.

The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq (FWCUI) reports that it recently discovered a plot to bribe relatives of its leaders in Basra, and to eventually kidnap and kill them. Harry Barnes, a leftwing Labor MP with close ties to Iraqi unions, charges that "the so-called resistance is deliberately targeting leaders of the Iraqi labor movement in order to prevent the growth of a new civil society in Iraq."

IFTU Singled Out

In the broader context of anti-union violence, it's clear that IFTU leaders are being singled out, a probable response to the union's position on the Iraqi elections, one of the few issues on which Iraqi unions disagree. "The IFTU supports democratic principles," explains Ghasib Hassan, head of the IFTU's Railway and Aviation Union. "And one of those principles is elections. So we supported them. The IFTU wants to see a democratically elected and accountable government, mandated by the people, so we can raise our legitimate questions and concerns ... This election was also a way of facing head-on those extremists and anti-democratic forces who don't want to see Iraq a democratic and secure state."

The FWCUI, on the other hand, condemned the balloting. "We called on workers to boycott these elections, because people were divided according to their ethnicity, language, and religion," explains Falah Alwan, the federation's president. "Its purpose was to impose the

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American project on Iraq, and give legitimacy to the government imposed by the Americans and the occupying coalition.

The same parties we saw in the old Governing Council will remain in power, and the political balance will remain the same.” The oil workers union took no official position on the election, but its leaders estimate that most members voted for the party slate headed by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which now governs the country.

Unions Oppose the Occupation

Iraqi unions do agree, however, on most other broad political issues, including the occupation itself, which they regard, as Ghasib Hassan puts it, as “brutal.” The IFTU, like other Iraqi labor federations, has close relations with a set of political parties, in its case the Iraqi Communist Party (with two ministers in the current government), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Issad al Allawi, and a party of Arab nationalists. IFTU activists say they opposed the occupation before the war, but were forced to deal with it once it began. They call for using UN Resolution 1545 as the basis for insisting that the United States leave once an elected government holds office.

“The war has resulted in extreme destruction of our country,” Hassan says. “This is not liberation. It is occupation, and we oppose it absolutely. At the beginning of the 21st century, we thought we’d seen the end of colonies, but now we’re entering a new era of colonization.”

The FWCUI is affiliated with the Workers’ Communist Party of Iraq, which has taken a much

more distant attitude toward the occupation authorities. Alwan says UN forces should replace U.S. troops. “We call for a congress of liberation, including all the powers in Iraq, to end the occupation and rebuild civil society,” he explains. The General Union of Oil Employees wants the troops to leave right away.

After survey-

ing SOCU members, “almost everyone [told us] they want the occupation to end immediately, and the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from Iraq,” says Juma’a.

At the end of the U.S. tour, the three unions agreed on a statement, made together with USLAW. This is the first time Iraq’s major unions have developed a common position on the two key issues that confront them—the occupation and privatization. “The occupation must end in all its forms, including military bases and economic domination,” the statement said. “The war was fought for oil and regional domination, in violation of international law, justified by lies and deception, without consultation with the Iraqi people. The occupation has been a catastrophe for both our peoples.”

The statement condemned the occupation’s economic program. “The national wealth and resources of Iraq belong to the Iraqi people,” it emphasized. “We are united in our opposition to the imposition of privatization of the Iraqi economy by the occupation, the IMF, the World Bank, foreign powers and any force that



Faleh Abood Umara, general secretary of the General Union of Oil Employees, as he enters St. Joseph the Worker church to a standing ovation, in Berkeley, CA.

takes away the right of the Iraqi people to determine their own economic future.”

There are a lot of reasons why workers and unions might hate the occupation. Iraqi unemployment, according to the economics faculty of Baghdad University, has been at 70 percent since the occupation started. Among U.S. occupation czar Paul Bremer’s neoliberal orders was number 30, issued in September of 2003 and still in force. It lowered the base wage in public enterprises, where most Iraqis work, to \$35/month, and ended subsidies for food and housing. Most of all, workers hate Law 150, issued by Saddam Hussein in 1987, which prohibited unions and collective bargaining in the public sector. Bremer chose to continue enforcing this measure, and bound the transitional government of Allawi to do the same. Bremer backed it up by issuing Public Order 1, banning even advocacy leading to civil disorder, and arrested IFTU leaders, expelling them from their Baghdad offices.

Iraqi unions see these moves as a way to soften up workers to ensure they don’t resist the privatization of the country’s economy. Interviewed at the Al-Doura refinery in October, 2003, manager Dathar Al-Kashab predicted that in that event “I’d have to fire 1500 [of the refinery’s 3000] workers. In America when a company lays people off, there’s unemployment insurance, and they won’t die from hunger. If I dismiss employees now, I’m killing them and their families.”

Privatization defies the tradition of social solidarity in Iraq, which would favor using oil revenues to industrialize the country, creating a public sector which can put people to work and ensure a self-sustaining national economy. Hassan Juma’a says workers at the Southern Oil Company began organizing their union as the troops were entering Basra because of “our fear that the purpose of the occupation is the oil, that they’ve come to take control of the oil industry. Without organizing ourselves,

we would be unable to protect our industry.” The IFTU also opposes privatization. “Iraqi publicly owned enterprises should stay publicly owned,” says Ghasib Hassan. “We will never accept the privatization of oil. It is the only source of wealth we can use to rebuild our country.”

Alwan and the FCWUI have organized worker committees in a number of Baghdad factories, and opposition to privatization has been a major motivation there also. Interviewed in October, 2003, at the Mamoun Vegetable Oil Factory, manager Amir Faraj Bhajet observed that “there’s no private person in Iraq with enough money to buy this place. It would have to be a foreign owner. They would like the assets, but would they want the workers?”

Organizing Under Occupation

Despite facing a hostile occupation with a vested interest in their suppression, and an armed insurgency targeting unions and civil society, Iraq’s labor movement has done a remarkable job of organizing workers and challenging the free-market rules. Some of the first street protests in Baghdad were organized by the Union of Unemployed of Iraq, now part of the FWCUI, which led to many arrests, particularly for the union’s head Qasim Hadi.

This past February, as IFTU leaders were being killed, Baghdad’s hotel workers struck first the Sheraton, and then the next-door Palestine Hotel. Both are luxurious establishments behind high blast walls, housing U.S. journalists and administrators.

Despite the U.S.-imposed ban, the IFTU has managed to force *de facto* recognition and bargaining in some workplaces, and now claims 12 national unions, and

200,000 members. Metalworkers at Baghdad’s Al Nassr molding and car parts factory won a minimum wage of 150,000 ID per month. The Rail Workers Union forced



Hashimia Muhsin Hussein, the first woman union president in Iraq's history.

a wage increase at Railways of the Iraqi Republic from 75,000 to 125,000 ID per month, and equal pay for men and women. And in May, 2004, Basra's power station workers, a hotbed of union activity, elected the first woman union president in Iraq's history. Hashimia Muhsin Hussein says the Electricity and Energy Workers' Union "will continue to struggle for workers' rights to union representation, social justice, and a stable, pluralistic, and democratic Iraq."

While the oil workers and the two Iraqi labor federations are organizationally independent from each other, they cooperate on the ground, especially in Basra and the South. According to Juma'a, "We're still looking to see which unions, at the end of the day, are the legitimate ones representing the interests of the workers."

Basra is also the scene of Iraqi workers' biggest victory so far. At the Southern Oil Company, the union first took on KBR, a division of Halliburton Corp., which was given a no-bid reconstruction contract to repair oil facilities. When KBR tried to bring in workers from outside the country to do the work, as a result of a strike in August, 2003, Iraqi workers threw them out. Then the union directly challenged the Bremer wage order. "We managed to get the minimum salary up to 150,000 Iraqi dinars, or about \$100," Hassan Juma'a recalls. "This is a beginning of the struggle to improve the income of the oil workers."

Similar fights broke out in the electrical stations around Basra, and Juma'a and the Basra head of the IFTU, Abu Lina, went to the deepwater port of Um Qasr to help dockworkers get organized and begin their own push for better wages. In April, the port workers

union, supported by the oil workers and others, blocked the port of Zubair, and forced out the Danish shipping giant Maersk, which took over the terminals at the start of the occupation. In mid-2004, the U.S. multinational Stevedoring Services of America was also forced out of the port of Um Qasr.

As a result of this activity, a higher percentage of factories in Iraq have worker-based organizing committees and fledgling unions than do factories in the United States. Iraqi workers and unions clearly need help and support, especially from the United States and Britain. But they may have something to teach as well, about how to organize and move forward in a situation unionists in most industrialized countries would find paralyzingly dangerous.

(David Bacon is a reporter and photographer specializing in labor issues and a regular contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus, online at www.fpif.org.)

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions
<http://www.iraqitradeunions.org/>

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
<http://www.icftu.org/>

U.S. Labor Against the War
<http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/>

Solidarity With Iraqi Workers
<http://www.iraqworkerssolidarity.org/>

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