

U.S. LABOR AGAINST THE WAR



USLAW Statement on the Iraqi Labor Solidarity Tour of U.S.

US Labor Against the War has organized an unprecedented national tour of Iraqi trade unionists from June 10-26, touring two dozen cities, and providing opportunities for thousands of US trade unionists to meet and talk with representatives of Iraq's labor movement who are fighting for a progressive, secular and democratic future. At the same time the tour will build the USLAW network to oppose the war and occupation. The response to the upcoming tour has been dramatic and we are confident that this project will succeed in expanding our movement and our goals. This tour represents an important opportunity for Iraqi unions to be heard. All those trade union leaders invited have already undergone significant hardship in the complex, onerous and ultimately successful struggle, with USLAW backing, to obtain visas.

We have invited three of the most important trade union organizations in Iraq - the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) and the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE). These three organizations represent a wide range of workers and industries as well as a range of strategies to represent their members under occupation while fighting for a future free from occupation. All three of these organizations have made significant contributions on behalf of Iraqi workers and we decided to invite them after considerable discussion about how to best represent the complex and diverse workers' struggle in Iraq to the US labor movement. Each organization decided who their own representatives will be.

Since a USLAW-supported delegation visited Iraq in October 2003 and met with Iraqi workers and unions, we have maintained relationships with most of the important labor groupings. We recognize that our labor movement has an unfortunate history of picking and choosing which unions it will grant legitimacy to in parts of the world where our government is interfering with national sovereignty. We refuse to act in that tradition.

U.S. Labor Against the War has from its inception called for immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupation forces from Iraq, for the right of Iraqis to determine, free of foreign interference, the future of their country, and full respect for labor, human rights and the rights of women. Our policy has been to work with and offer solidarity to all genuine labor organizations in Iraq.

The role of US and international trade unionists is to oppose the occupation while supporting all forces genuinely representing workers and fighting to assure that Iraq implements full internationally recognized trade union rights. The workers of Iraq will decide who they want to represent them as this process unfolds.

We recognize there are differences between the various major labor organizations in Iraq, as well as different tendencies within them - just as there are in our own labor movement. Each of the labor federations reflects the complex ethnic, religious, regional and political diversity of the larger Iraqi society. Giving US trade unionists an opportunity to learn about this is an important goal of the tour. These Iraqi labor leaders' voices will be the first to be widely heard in the U.S. Essential to building an antiwar majority is that they be heard by as many workers as possible.

All three federations are aware of USLAW's opposition to the U.S. occupation. Their purpose in coming is not to debate their differences but to inform Americans about the daily reality working people confront in occupied Iraq and their resistance to it. In addition, by accepting our invitation to tour the U.S.,



starting with five days they will spend together in DC before splitting up to travel across the country, all three groups took an important unifying step.

The IFTU, FWCUI and GUOE all oppose the occupation and demand that all foreign forces leave their country and that their sovereignty be fully restored. Their stand on this issue has been well documented in the press, in speeches delivered at international meetings, and in discussions and interviews with representatives of USLAW. (See the background articles posted on the USLAW website at www.uslaboragainstar.org for more detail.)

One criticism of the IFTU is that they are dominated by the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which chose to participate in the Interim Governing Council and in the elections. By extension, it has been charged that this means they favor the occupation and are thus collaborators with the U.S. and British occupation forces. The IFTU, a federation which reports a membership of 200,000 who hold a variety of viewpoints - just like members of our own unions - in a range of industries, is supported by multiple parties with a broad spectrum of often conflicting views. The IFTU is organizing strikes and other militant actions against U.S. plans to privatize the economy.

The FWCUI, itself supported by another Marxist political party, is opposed to the occupation but also strongly condemns the armed resistance, characterizing it as an instrument of "political Islam" (extreme religious fundamentalism) intent on imposing theocratic rule, and deposed Ba'athists seeking to recover power. It opposed participation in the elections and Interim Governing Council.

The General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) opposes the occupation and calls for immediate withdrawal but was neutral on participation in the election. Whereas the GUOE wants all foreign troops out immediately, both the IFTU and the Workers Councils call for replacement of US and British forces with neutral forces from the UN, the Arab League and other nations as a transition.

There are other trade union forces and civil society formations in Iraq which similarly differ on a range of issues confronting Iraq, including how to relate to elections and the ongoing political process. Iraq is a society which is easily as varied in its range of views and political allegiances as is our own.

All three of the union federations we invited have been targets of the occupation. The IFTU had its offices raided and trashed by occupation forces and its leaders have been arrested and harassed. Its leaders have been kidnapped, tortured and assassinated by elements of the insurgency that clearly do not support or care about the rights of workers. All three federations continue to be subject to the 1987 Hussein decree banning unions in the public sector and public enterprises, notwithstanding the fact that the IGC (though not the Provisional Governing Authority) granted the IFTU official recognition and that the transitional law states that unions have the right to organize. All three organizations continue to call for enforcement of the ILO standards that would allow workers to freely choose which organization should represent them and have struggled to create a labor law that provides genuine trade union rights for workers in Iraq in a pluralistic labor movement.

Most of us in the US know little about Iraqi history and the current situation on the ground and need to be careful in making judgements on selective news reports or internet postings that pick and choose quotes to attack one or another of the federations invited.

For example, some have portrayed the IFTU and the Iraqi Communist Party as pro-occupation. Here is a statement that was made by the ICP to an international meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Athens, Greece on October 8-10, 2004. The ICP observed:

Resisting occupation is a right enshrined by the UN Charter. The Iraqi people, therefore, have a legitimate right to resort to various forms of struggle to end the occupation and restore national sovereignty. But resisting occupation is not limited to employing violent means in struggle, but rather includes various forms of political struggle. The lessons of

history teach us that peoples only resort to armed struggle when they are forced to do so after exhausting political means....

Conferring international legitimacy on occupation through UN Security Council Resolution 1484 in late May 2003, instead of handing over power to an Iraqi broad coalition government as all political forces including our Party had demanded, created further serious obstacles. The setting up of the Governing Council, with limited but important powers, and with the participation of all major political parties at the time, was therefore a compromise, reached with active mediation by the UN....

Our Party stressed that the Council was only one arena and one platform, among others, for our struggle to achieve national sovereignty and independence. We always emphasized the need to continuously combine between our work within the Council, and in the present interim government, and our efforts of a mass character, as well as strengthening relations with all forces that want to achieve the transition to end the occupation and build a united federal democratic Iraq. [<http://www.iraqcp.org/framse1/0041019icp.htm>]

USLAW representative David Bacon interviewed Ghasib Hassan, an IFTU railway workers leader and national executive board member, in London in February, 2005. Here is an excerpt:

Q: What is the attitude of the IFTU toward the occupation?

A: We oppose the occupation absolutely. We know they've said many things about it. One is that it's for the liberation of Iraq. This is what the American politicians and media tell us - that they've come to liberate our country. This is not liberation. It is occupation. It's led to the total destruction of the economic infrastructure of Iraq, with the aim of controlling its wealth and resources. Another disastrous policy was the dismantling of the Iraqi Army, which had a long nationalist tradition. There's been a deliberate destruction of our national and cultural heritage, like the looting of the National Museum, and stationing occupation forces in historical places like Babel, Ur and Nineveh. That will lead to the destruction of these sites, and they can never be replaced. The Iraqi people are calling today, not tomorrow, for the removal of the occupation. US policy toward Iraq is not clear - it can change in a moment. The key political forces in Iraq are in discussion with the occupation forces in line with UN Resolution 1546, calling for the withdrawal of the troops and attaining the full sovereignty of Iraq.

...On a daily basis, at least 10-15 people die, and this can't be good. This is a result of terrorism, but terrorism wasn't present prior to the war. You can see that the US administration has imported terrorism into Iraq in order to fight it, but at the expense of the Iraqi people.

I want to talk about the brutality of the occupation. The war has resulted in extreme destruction of our country. Whole factories and workplaces have been destroyed. Some of those which survived were then destroyed later by the occupation forces. The occupation has increased unemployment, which has now become a major problem for Iraqi workers. It is very dangerous to have such high unemployment in a country with such wealth.

We call on your solidarity to end the brutal occupation of our country. 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 colonialization. We are campaigning to end the occupation of Iraq, to build a democratic, federal Iraq which will guarantee the rights and jobs of its people.

...Workers should be free to join the union of their own choice. We campaign for social, economic and political advances in the interest of working people. We want a strong working class positioned to engage fully in building a federal, prosperous and democratic Iraq. [http://www.truthout.org/issues_05/033105LA.shtml]

These quotes are provided not to advocate for the positions of the IFTU but to make clear that it is a legitimate force for a progressive democratic sovereign Iraq, as are all the federations invited to the US. Each deserves to be heard.

The objective of the tour is to build understanding and solidarity with Iraq's labor movement and working class among US trade unionists and the anti-war movement and we hope that everyone will seize upon this tour as an opportunity to learn and understand more about the Iraqi working class and labor movement. From each we can learn much about Iraq, Iraq's labor movement, and the resistance to occupation. Across the country, we need to engage with all the Iraqis in a real discussion - including even critical questions for them - that will help us understand their thinking and vice versa.

Our responsibility to the workers and labor movement of Iraq is to get the U.S. and other foreign powers off their backs and out of their country, to let the Iraqi people determine for themselves what form of government, constitution, legislative structures, labor law, and labor movement they will have once their sovereignty has been restored.

If Iraq is to achieve a secular, democratic and pluralistic future, the labor movement and other civil society forces must play a central role. Iraq's unions need genuine working class solidarity, especially from those of us who oppose what our government has done and continues to do in our name. We look forward to working together to make this tour as successful as possible by enabling the largest audiences we can attract to hear the truth of what working people face in Iraq.

U.S. Labor Against War Co-Convenors

Gene Bruskin

Maria Guillen

Fred Mason

Bob Muehlenkamp

Nancy Wohlforth

Issued: May 31, 2005