

## Iraqi labor leaders visit Portland

Posted On: Jun 30, 2005 (16:19:02)

**Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen (far right) at the local labor luncheon for the visiting Iraqis.**

*On June 22 labor unions, faith groups and social justice organizations had the privilege of hosting a visit from two Iraqi labor leaders, Hassan Juma'a Awad Al Asade and Feleh Abbood Umara. Hassan and Feleh were part of the U.S.-Iraqi Labor Tour that began in Washington D.C., where six Iraqi labor leaders met with members of Congress and leaders of the AFL-CIO. From there they spread out in pairs to cover 22 American cities. The Oregon AFL-CIO sponsored the Portland event and over 50 labor, religious and community organizations signed on as co-sponsors, including AFSCME Council 75 and five AFSCME locals.*



*Hassan and Feleh are founders of the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) in Iraq. Both were labor and human rights activists under the Hussein regime. Both were jailed by the regime for their "subversive activity." Now their union, while still officially illegal, is actively opposing the policies of Halliburton's subsidiaries working in the oil sector and successfully forced the former US official L. Paul Bremer III, administrator for the Coalition Provisional Authority, to dramatically increase wages for oil workers. The oil workers union has taken a strong stand against any plans for privatization and foreign domination.*

*The following is a report on the Portland segment of the Iraqi Labor Tour.*

**By Leslie Kochan  
Local 3336 (DEQ)**

"Your struggle is our struggle. It is the same government and the same corporations that are exploiting you that exploit us." Such was the welcome given to Hassan Juma'a Awad Al Asade, 53, and Feleh Abbood Umara, 47, by Leal Sundet, President of Local 8 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), at the start of their June 22 Portland tour. After speaking at a press conference held at the Port of Portland with ILWU workers, Hassan and Feleh attended a union lunch at the Musicians' Hall and met with city and county officials. Then it was on to an evening forum at PSU before 400-450 union and community members.

While the two Iraqi leaders stated that it was important to be rid of Saddam Hussein, they did not support what they saw as the real reason behind the U.S. invasion. They believe that the occupation's goal from the beginning has been to control Iraqi oil and privatize all industries. They emphasized that the only infrastructure the U.S. tried to protect during and after the war was the

oil infrastructure, and stated, "War has left nothing for the Iraqis, only the oil." As for the occupation's efforts to rebuild the country, one of them asked, "Where is the money for rebuilding our country going? If money were spent on what it says in the media, Iraq should be a paradise by now."

Questions following brief presentations by Hassan and Feleh further clarified their desires for a stable Iraq. As to the potential to form a free and united Iraq, the reply was, "We cannot form a democratic government with the occupation happening." When asked to name the most important thing the U.S. could do to improve security in Iraq, their answer was, "Exit Iraq."

Both Iraqis emphasized that the central struggle the Iraqi unions have undertaken is over the control of the country's resources and an end to privatization efforts pushed by the U.S., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: "We are going to stand firmly against privatization because we will sacrifice ourselves for our country."

Hassan and Feleh described a situation that would be unimaginable to most American — a raging insurgency, an occupying force that denies them the most basic union rights and wants to control their most precious resources, a devastated infrastructure, contaminated drinking water, and unemployment at 70 percent in some parts of the country. And they described how, under these circumstances, they are organizing and fighting back.

Because they believe that "the legitimacy and legality of the unions come from the workers, not the state or the occupation," they have used the power of collective action and won. One example cited was the response to Bremer's "Order 30," which cut benefits to workers such as food subsidies and extra pay for working in remote locations or in hazardous conditions, and lowered minimum wages from \$60/month to \$40/month.

In response to Order 30, oil workers from Basra traveled 550 kilometers through the dangers of continued fighting and land mines to reach Baghdad. Upon reaching the Oil Ministry, they were forbidden from entering by U.S. tanks. They protested and threatened a strike. They were finally allowed in and after days of negotiation left for Basra with their demands for reinstatement of benefits and salary increases met.

When they returned to Basra, they faced another problem. KBR (formerly Kellogg, Brown & Root), a subsidiary of Halliburton, had been handed a contract to manage oil sites in Basra, and was not only incompetent but tried to bring in 1,200 Asian workers to do the jobs of the oil workers. The oil union and port workers union stopped the export of oil from Iraqi ports. KBR was forced to pack up its equipment and workers and return to Kuwait.

Lastly, Hassan and Feleh emphasized the need for solidarity with all workers worldwide, but especially in the U.S, where U.S. workers have the most power to pressure the U.S. to end the occupation. The closing thought from Hassan was a reflection of both the warmth and determination of the Iraqi leaders: "I would like to meet you in an Iraq that is free and united."

*© Copyright 2005, Oregon AFSCME Council 75. This information may not be republished without express consent.*