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What's New Around the Union This Week

Iraqis Fighting to Rebuild National Labor Movement

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From security issues to high unemployment and a lack of strong workers' rights law, Iraqi union activists are fighting to overcome tough obstacles to rebuild their country's labor movement, Iraqi union leaders told CWA members and others in Washington D.C. this week as they began a nationwide speaking tour.

"Our fundamental goal is a progressive, modern, civilized labor law that guarantees workers' rights," said Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions of Iraq. "We have an incredible opportunity to build a progressive, independent labor movement that could be a model for the entire Middle East."

Adnan Rashed, an executive officer and leader of the Union of Mechanics, Printing and Metals Workers said, "We have modest and simple resources yet an iron will to rebuild our labor movement."

The two men are among six Iraqi trade union leaders touring the country. They met Monday with AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and spent an hour with CWA President Morton Bahr on Tuesday, before making a lunchtime presentation to CWA staff.

The activists are calling for new laws based on internationally recognized labor standards, such as the freedom to join a union. They also want to ensure a bigger role in the economy for working women, who make up 60 percent of the workforce.

For many years until the late 1980s, Iraq had a thriving labor movement. But many unions were forced underground in 1987 when Saddam Hussein outlawed unions representing public-sector workers, who made up 80 percent of the workforce.

Some public sector unions reemerged in 2003 after Saddam's fall. But Alwan said unions that remained in the private sector were government fronts and oppressed workers. "So we are starting from zero due to a lack of a real trade union culture," he said.

Like workers around the world, key issues for Iraqis include higher wages, better working conditions, safety and health protections and threats of privatization - in Iraq's case, the oil industry. But the issues are even more complicated for Iraqis because of the chaos and security problems.

Still, the leaders believe that with backing from workers around the world, they can be successful. "We can't do this alone," Alwan says. "We're all in the same situation and we need your support and solidarity."

[Back to list](#)