



## Labor Activists Say Iraq Conflict Robs Home Front

By Zachary Dowdy  
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Two months before tanks rolled across Iraqi borders in March 2003, thousands of union members, including GCC/IBT members, were organizing on U.S. soil to stop a campaign that, to date, has taken the lives of more than 3,500 U.S. troops and untold thousands of Iraqis, and has cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

That death toll is bad enough, say representatives of U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW), a coalition of labor organizations that represents up to 6 million working people in all industries.

But they say the war has also robbed communities of billions of dollars that could have been better used for critical services like health care, education, job training, infrastructure, a clean environment – the hidden but massive price of the war effort.

"If it weren't for this war, we could have single-payer health care to cover every American," said Michael Eisenscher, the Oakland-based national coordinator for USLAW. "If it weren't for this war you could reduce class size all across America. You don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about all the opportunities we have missed."

That's a central message of the group, which was founded in January 2003 at Chicago's Teamster Local 705: Money spent on war could be doing good at home.

Four years after its founding, USLAW has a two-person paid staff and countless volunteers. It is funded by donations from union locals and through individual memberships costing \$25 a year – and it shuns corporate sponsorship.

USLAW has retained its grassroots origins: Eisenscher said it tends to organize working people who then demand their leaders take action. But it has grown into a force with which Washington must contend, gaining the attention of members of Congress and helping to organize the country's largest anti-war demonstrations since President George W. Bush ordered the Iraq invasion.

The group is organizing a 12-city tour for two Iraqi labor leaders who will speak throughout June on both coasts. One of the visitors is the first woman to head a national labor union in Iraq.

USLAW's mission statement is a manifesto that gives the worker a central role in civic life, saying working men and women have the most at stake in the Iraq war.

"We are living in an era in which the government has manipulated our nation's fear of terrorism to launch wars, destroy our economic security, undermine government services, erode our democratic rights, and intensify racism, sexism, religious discrimination and divisions among working people... We cannot solve these problems without addressing U.S. foreign policy and its consequences," the statement says.

GCC/IBT members have helped the group from the start.

"I think USLAW has been successful with regard to advancing discussion," said Eddie Rosario, business agent for GCC/IBT's Local-1L in New York and a former president of GCC/IBT Local 4N, in San Francisco, which he headed when USLAW was founded.

He added that USLAW's reading of the war's consequences on working people and those who are sent to fight overseas are mere extensions of the battles workers have with employers and wages at the negotiating table and on the job.

"The connection of the war abroad is directly connected to what the struggles are here at home," he said. "They really are trade union issues."

Denis Mosgofian, another former president of Local 4-N



Union activists allied with U.S. Labor Against the War march in Washington, D.C. to protest the Iraq conflict and call attention to what they say are the hidden costs of a costly effort that diverts billions from essential domestic needs.

and a retired platemaker who worked at the San Francisco Chronicle, said the local has taken a strong stance against the war, as has the San Francisco Labor Council.

Mosgofian called the war a quest for global dominance – and that organized labor must speak out.

"Our local has been opposed to the war for a very long time and we recognized it as a war of conquest and a war for oil and not what the administration said it was about," he said. "And quite a number of our Local 4N members have participated in a variety of ways, in some of the very large anti-war demonstrations, making creative signs and marching in almost all of the big rallies out here in the San Francisco area."

Mosgofian cited a recent Harvard economist's study that said the health care costs of the war on soldiers would reach \$600 billion, a staggering figure that Mosgofian said must be added to the \$300-400 billion that has already been committed in the fighting effort.

"This trillion dollars we have now spent or are going to spend is really a subsidy by the public in terms of dollars and blood for the oil companies," he said. "That's a crime. Do we stand by and watch crimes and not do anything...? That doesn't make any sense."

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