

A Report on a USLAW-British Labor Solidarity Visit
‘Opposing the War and Supporting Iraqi Unions’
August 4-7, 2004 London England
By Gene Bruskin, Co-Convenor, US Labor Against the War

INTRODUCTION

From August 4-7, 2004 I visited London on behalf of US Labor Against the War (USLAW). The tightly packed trip consisted of a series of one on one meetings with British national anti war labor leaders and members of Parliament, public speaking events, discussions with London-based Iraqi representatives from the two major Iraqi labor federations and media interviews.

The enthusiastic response I received on behalf of USLAW was based on the respect and importance attributed to the labor-anti-war movement in the US by our British brothers and sisters. There was little concern about the fact that I didn't come as an official representative of the AFL-CIO or one of its International affiliates. The fact that a significant sector of the labor movement in the "belly of the beast" was breaking from its traditional role of unquestioned support of US foreign policy adventures was a sign of hope and encouragement to our British counterparts and to the Iraqi labor representatives based in London. The news of the strong anti-war resolutions that had recently passed at SEIU, AFSCME and the California State AFL-CIO was enthusiastically received. Many trade unionists in England were familiar with the work of USLAW.

Despite the fact that many labor leaders were on vacation during the visit, I was able to meet the national presidents of the railroad, university lecturers and the communication workers unions and the national vice president of the union representing employees in the national government.

In addition I was able to meet privately with Jeremy Corbin, a prominent Labour Party member of Parliament and a central figure in the British anti-war and international solidarity movements and as Tony Benn, a renowned long-time leader of the British Labour Party and progressive movements.

I also met separately with Abdullah Muhsin, the International Representative for the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and Dashti Jamal, the London Representative for the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI). On behalf of USLAW I presented each federation a check for \$5000, funds contributed by workers and their unions in the U.S, to support their organizing work in Iraq.

I spoke at a public meeting for 75-100 trade unionists from a variety of unions that was hosted by the Camden Branch of Unison, the largest union in England, which represents public sector workers. I also spoke at a well-attended public meeting for the broader anti-war community, including trade unionists and Iraqis as well as other anti-war activists, that was hosted by Iraq Occupation Focus.

I spoke at a Hiroshima day ceremony on August 6 in remembrance of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945.

On the last evening of my visit I was given a reception at a union-owned pub, Bread and Roses, sponsored by an area Trades Council, the equivalent of a Central Labor Council in the US. The pub was a large bustling labor center, which gives its profits to anti-sweatshop campaigns, and other progressive struggles.

I owe a special thanks to Ewa Jasiewicz of the Iraq Occupation Focus who put in a lot of work setting up my itinerary and helping me to get from place to place. Alex Gordon of the RMT (railroad workers

union) and a leader in the Iraq Solidarity movement also helped facilitate my trip, educated me about some of the work being done in England and was a gracious host as well. Most of the people and unions mentioned in this report made a special effort to make my visit successful.

British Labor Movement and Iraq

The British Labor movement has been a leading force in the opposition to the war in Iraq from the outset of anti-war activity in 2002/2003. Twenty national unions are formally affiliated to the large Stop the War Coalition. Anti-war sentiment is widespread among the rank and file and the leadership in the labor movement and the population.

The labor movement has provided significant support for the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions whose international representative, Abdullah Muhsin, is based in London. Abdullah has spoken regularly to British labor audiences and union leaders.

The first British delegation to Iraq occurred shortly before the October 2003 USLAW delegation. In fact, the delegations missed overlapping by only one day. The delegation consisted of members of the Fire Brigades Union, RMT (railroad workers), the National Union of Journalists and Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA). It was telling that the labor anti-war movements in our countries were not even aware that our respective delegations were going to Iraq in the same time period and thus made no attempt to arrange to meet there. This speaks directly to the need for coordination and communications between our two movements which was a central reason for my trips to England. Our governments coordinate their actions and yet our labor movements have been totally out of touch. The "Coalition" between our governments will likely be central not only to the outcome of the occupation in Iraq but to any future US led military adventures and, therefore, the importance of combining our labor anti-war forces is critical.

In February of 2004, Owen Tudor of the Trade Union Congress (TUC), the British equivalent of the AFL-CIO, visited Iraq as part of an International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU) delegation, including the AFL-CIO.

The British labor movement has provided considerable material support to the Iraqis. The RMT supplied ten laptop computers. The British civil service union PCS donated 500 Pounds (about \$800) to the IFTU. In March of this year the Fire Brigades Union shipped badly needed fire-fighting equipment to Iraqi fire fighters. Currently the labor movement is developing a training CD in English and Arabic to provide basic training materials and training to the Iraqis in collective bargaining and union representation. The Fire Brigades Union is planning additional material support and a second visit to Iraq. IFTU General Secretary Subhi Abdullah was brought to England in June of 2004 and addressed a national meeting of the public employees union UNISON, Britain's largest union. He will be given a prominent speaking opportunity at the European Social Forum to be held in London in October of this year, with the support of the British labor movement. UNISON just recently provided Abdullah Muhsin with an office with a computer and telephone to facilitate his work in England. The labor movement has taken up a new campaign to raise money to buy a bus for a traveling IFTU workers theater education project in Iraq.

In September 2004 the TUC voted to support a resolution by NPFTH, the college lecturers union, that condemns the occupation, calls for a speedy withdrawal and the dismantling of Coalition military bases, condemns the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners, establishes a TUC solidarity committee to provide for ongoing practical support for Iraqi unions, calls for union-to-union relationships with a special emphasis on facilitating connections between Iraqi and British women trade unionists.

Meetings with British Trade Union Leaders

I was able to meet privately with several national union leaders, including Paul Mackney, General Secretary, University and College Lecturers Union (NAFTHE); Sue Bond, National VP, Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and Billy Hayes, National President, Communication Workers Union (CWU). All three unions have been very active in the anti-war movement and all have been a part of the trade union opposition to the policies of the Blair administration including privatizing parts of the public health system, attacks on public pension plans and the higher education system, cut backs in public service workers and forcing a national strike by the firefighters (FBU). The British government has spent more than \$6 billion on the war in Iraq.

The rise of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s caused significant setbacks for the British labor movement. Membership is down from 55% in 1979 to 29% in 2002 (61% public sector, 19% private sector). However, membership has stopped falling in this decade and a number of left/progressive national leaders have been elected in key unions. But the combination of the social policies of Blair's New Labour and the war in Iraq has resulted in a crisis for both the party and the trade union movement. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) voted to end its 86-year-old affiliation to the Labour Party as a result of the government's stand on its contract and national strike. The Labour Party expelled the rail union, RMT, when it gave its members the option of having political contributions to other parties deducted from their pay. There is a struggle within the trade union movement about how to relate to the Labour Party. Some unions and union leaders are working with a new party called Respect Coalition. When I met with Billy Hayes he had recently been a part of union negotiations with Labor party leaders in which unions wrested some concessions as a condition of their continued support for Blair.

There are some parallels to the US labor movement's relationship to the Democratic Party, but with some significant differences. The labor movement was at the heart of the formation of the Labour Party and historically plays a central role in its policies. In contrast, the Democratic Party in the US was, until the New Deal, a Dixiecrat dominated party and is still limited by those roots. There are many other parallels and differences that I won't elaborate here, but one is that the trade union movement in Britain has been openly challenging the Labour led government on both its domestic and international policies.

Meeting with British Political Leaders

I had an opportunity to meet with and share a speaking platform with both Jeremy Corbin and Tony Benn, two prominent leaders of left Labour in England.. As I mentioned earlier, Jeremy Corbin is a Labour MP and regarded as the national leader in the Stop the War coalition as well as a key international liaison for British progressives on issues such as Columbia and the Israeli/Palestinian crisis. While in the US we have some congressional representatives whose politics might bear similarities to Jeremy's (Bernie Sanders, Barbara Lee, Dennis Kucinich, Jesse Jackson Jr.) none have the equivalent national and international standing. He invited me to speak with him and others at the Hiroshima/Nagasaki commemorative event he chaired. It was a moving and solemn moment, given the fact that the US dropped atomic bombs on the civilians of the two cities resulting in massive death and destruction. He joined me at the main public speech I gave at the Friends meeting house, along with Greg Tucker of the rail workers union, RMT..

Tony Benn has a long and important history as a powerful progressive force in the Labour Party serving 50 years in Parliament before retiring in 2001. He remains active in progressive causes and speaks and writes frequently in England and internationally. Tony spoke at the Hiroshima/Nagasaki event and joined the reception for me at the Trades Council's Bread and Roses pub, where he made some remarks. He is an inspiring figure and it was an honor to meet with him.

Both represent a progressive legacy of the Labour Party that has been under attack since the Thatcher administration and that finds itself in a heated conflict with Blair, both on the issue of the war in Iraq and on the Labour Party attacks on the British social welfare system.

It was refreshing to be with politicians with such clear left/progressive politics who play such a prominent role in current and recent British politics. Both of them were enormously interested in the work of USLAW and praised it in their public remarks. They emphasized to me the importance of our work to progressive people in England and around the world. I found it both sobering and humbling to be reminded of this.

Meetings with Iraqi Federation Representatives

I met with representatives of both the IFTU and the FWCUI in London and presented each federation with a check for \$5000, money that was contributed by rank and file workers and staff in the spring of 2004 of unions all across the US. USLAW representatives met with both federations in Iraq in October of 2003 when our delegation went to Iraq to learn about the Iraqi labor movement meet its leaders and visit unionized workplaces. We have continued to stay in touch by phone, email and in face-to-face meetings in Europe. In England, most of the solidarity work has been on behalf of the IFTU, in part because the British labor movement, for a variety of reasons, is less familiar with the work of the FWCUI/UUI. I took the opportunity in all of my meetings and presentations with British trade unionists to emphasize USLAW's view on this-- namely we felt that the US government and trade union movement had an unfortunate history of picking and even creating unions that fit our governments goals, a role that USLAW did not think was appropriate for our movement or the international labor movement. For that reason we are working with both federations in Iraq and encouraging the international labor movement to do the same. I explained that USLAW believes it is up to the Iraqi workers themselves to decide which unions should represent them and on the structure of their labor movement. While both federations, in our conversations, agreed with this principle, they continue to have significant differences on the ground in Iraq. While I will only touch on this in this report there is considerable information available on the USLAW website and the sites of the two federations. (see appendix for contact information) Both federations welcomed USLAW to send delegations to Iraq and expressed an interest in facilitating sector to sector contacts between US and Iraqi unions



Figure 1 Gene Bruskin Hands Dashti Jamal a \$5000 USLAW Solidarity Contribution

Federation of Worker's Councils and Unions (FWCUI), Union of Unemployed in Iraq (UUI) and Organization of Women's Freedom

I met with Dashti Jamal, the London representative for FWCUI and UUI and Houzan Mahmoud, London Coordinator for the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq. These organizations work closely together in Iraq. The FWCUI represents workers in a range of industries including factories producing sugar, leather, vegetable oil, cigarettes, and textile. The UUI has been organizing amongst the huge numbers of unemployed Iraqis (estimates as high as 60% unemployed) since May of 2003 to demand jobs or unemployment benefits. The UUI recently opened a new branch in Basra, which is providing free medical care and medicine to the unemployed and has opened a hiring hall to help the unemployed link up with the limited available employment opportunities.

UII and the FWCUI have taken strong positions on the importance of including women as equals in all aspects of society and opposing the imposition of Islamic law in Iraqi society. They are committed to a secular Iraqi government and offer membership without regard to religious affiliation or identity. The OWFI and FWCUI are currently coordinating efforts to organize women bank workers. In March of 2004 they successfully campaigned to free a large group of women tellers who had been imprisoned and falsely accused of the currency theft that occurred when the US changed the Iraqi currency.

Dashti had just returned from Iraq and showed me pictures of recent events that had been organized in Sulaymaniyah featuring large numbers of women and children as part of a campaign for benefits for children and against child beating. The organizations are all supporting a campaign in Kirkuk and Baghdad of women opposed to honor killing, a practice in which women are killed by their husbands or family when they are accused of infidelity.

At my meeting with Dashti and Houzan I presented them with a check for \$5000 from USLAW.

USLAW has worked with other international trade unionists and the FWCUI in an international campaign for labor rights in Iraq. We have jointly visited and called on the International Labor Organization (the ILO, the UN agency that monitors labor rights around the world) to assure that the ILO conventions guaranteeing the right to assemble, organize and strike free of government or employer interference becomes part of the law of an emerging Iraq and that the Iraqis themselves be involved in drawing up any laws or labor codes governing trade union activity. To date Saddam Hussein's 1987 law is still on the books, forbidding unions in the public sector of Iraq, which includes most basic industries. At the same time the transitional law created by the US nominally includes the right to organize and strike, so the situation is still unclear.

We have also assisted the FWCUI in filing a complaint with the ILO against the Iraqi transitional government, which the FWCUI does not recognize. The Coalition Provisional Authority, in January of 2004, issued Decree #16 declaring the IFTU to be "the legitimate representative of the labor movement in Iraq." The complaint, widely supported internationally, alleges that it is a violation of international labor rights for the Iraqi or US government to decide which union is legitimate and which isn't—only workers should be able to decide that. The new transitional government recently issued a statement, which reiterates Decree #16. The ILO is expected to hear the complaint this Fall.

Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions

I met with Abdullah Muhsen on several occasions and we shared several speaking platforms during my visit. We met together at the RMT offices; spoke at the meeting organized by Unison and at the reception organized by the local labor movement in London. In his presentations he emphasized that the three main objectives of the IFTU at this point are to 1) build a strong independent trade union movement as part of a secular, democratic Iraq with a strong labor code 2) campaign for a free and open election in Iraq for the return of full sovereignty and 3) resist privatization of the economy, especially the oil sector.

He said that the IFTU is divided into 12 national trade unions such as metalworkers, transportation workers, oil workers etc. This summer six of these different sectors, held national meetings to elect leaders and formalize their national structures.

Figure 2 Gene Bruskin Presents Abdullah Musin a \$5000 Solidarity Contribution from USLAW

Abdullah has lived in exile in England since the 1980s and has developed extensive relationships with the trade union movement in England and in other countries.

Abdullah and a representative of the Iraqi government met with representatives of the ILO, on several occasions to discuss the creation of a new labor law. The IFTU has contact with and recognizes the transitional Iraqi government. Abdullah told me that the ILO has reportedly completed a first draft of the labor law that he hopes will assure the right to join unions and give unions the right to bargain, organize and strike, as guaranteed by ILO conventions. The draft has not been made public and Abdullah had not seen it..



One of the IFTU projects being promoted for fundraising in Britain is an educational and cultural theatre project that will be brought to Iraqi workers to promote and build unions and the IFTU.

I presented Abdullah with a check for \$5000 to support the work of the IFTU>

Concluding Thoughts

Many of us have been frustrated over the years by the lack of genuine expressions of International solidarity in the US labor movement. While it is broadly acknowledged that such solidarity is critical for the labor movement to survive in a multinational corporate-dominated globalized economy, good examples of genuine international solidarity are all too rare.

The exemplary solidarity work of the British labor movement inspired me to redouble our efforts in the US to support Iraqi unions and to deepen the opposition to the war within the labor movement. It also reemphasized the need for our movements to be genuinely intercontinental. The struggle of Iraqi workers has provided an opportunity for us in the US to reexamine our labor movement's role in foreign policy debates. USLAW has helped to invigorate discussion within labor about the crucial issues of war and peace in this era, but also on the issue of international solidarity. The existence of an active labor movement in Iraq has made it possible for us not only to oppose the war but to support worker rights. We believe that our work is helping the most hopeful and progressive secular democratic force within Iraq-the labor movement- to succeed. My visit to England raises stakes in the challenge for us in the US, where the actions of our government have created a special responsibility for the citizens of our nation to take decisive action.

In addition to redoubling our solidarity efforts we need to combine and coordinate them more effectively with the British and other international efforts of solidarity with Iraqi workers. The notion of a truly global labor solidarity movement with Iraqi workers is still a distant vision, but one worth aspiring to. Its success could have important implications in making the labor movement a decisive force in shaping our vision of peace and social justice in the 21st century.

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LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS CONTACTED IN LONDON

Labor

Paul Mackney
General Secretary, NAFTHE, University and College Lecturers Union

Sue Bond
National VP, Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)

Billy Hayes,
National President, Communication Workers Union

Tony Donaghey
President, RMT, (Railroad workers union)
Alex Gordon, RMT representative
(Helps coordinate labor Anti-War activity)

Liz Leicester
Chair, Camden Branch, Unison (public employees)
Dick Barry, Unison Public Affairs Director

Daniel Blackburn, Director
International Center for Trade Union Rights, (ICTUR)

Eric Lee
Director, Labour Start web page

Government

Jeremy Corbin, Labour Party Member of Parliament
Leader, Stop the War Coalition)

Tony Benn, Labour Party leader, former MP, author

Iraqi Labor Representatives

Abdullah Muhsin, IFTU International Representative
Website: www.iraqtradeunions.org

Dashti Jamal, FWCUI/UUI Representative in England
Website: www.uuiiraq.org
Houzan Mahmoud, London Coordinator
Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq

Anti-War Movement

Liz Davies, Ewa Jasiewicz, Iraq Occupation Focus (www.iraqoccupationfocus.org.uk)