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## Iraqi union leaders seek troop withdrawal, solidarity

By Barb Kucera, Workday Minnesota editor — June 17, 2005

ST. PAUL — Two Iraqi union leaders Thursday issued a call for U.S. troops to withdraw from Iraq and pledged solidarity with workers in the United States and around the globe.

More than 300 people packed the Carpenters hall for discussion with Falah Awan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq (FWCUI), and Amjad Ali Aljawhry, an Iraqi union leader in exile in Canada and a representative of the FWCUI in North America.

The union leaders are part of a six-member delegation touring the United States at the invitation of U.S. Labor Against the War. In the Twin Cities, their visit was sponsored by the United Steelworkers, several other unions and other organizations.



Iraqi labor leaders Falah Awan (left) and Amjad Ali Aljawhry addressed a huge crowd at the Carpenters hall.

### Union Advocate photo

"We hosted this event because we believe, as trade unionists, that a fundamental building block for the creation of a prosperous, safe and free society is the exercise of workers' rights – the right for everyone to earn enough money to put food on the table, a roof over their head and clothes on their back," said Steelworkers District 11 Director Dave Foster.

"Nowhere today is the absence of labor and human rights being played out with more chilling effect than in Iraq. And nowhere do the obligations of American citizenship require us to speak out more

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forcefully and to demand that these basic rights be observed than in Iraq."



**Dave Foster, district director of the Steelworkers Union, said unions are critical to the creation of democracy in Iraq.**

*Union Advocate photo*

Even though Saddam Hussein is no longer in power, the United States and the new Iraqi government continue to enforce Hussein's laws banning most unions. Before the war, Awan refused to sign a Saddam loyalty pledge and was blacklisted from his job as an engineer. He became an underground union organizer. Ali Ajawhry was blacklisted for his political views and union organizing among sewing workers and was forced to flee, first to Turkey, then to Canada.

Today, union organizing continues, but faces serious problems because of government repression, ethnic tensions and the security problems that make daily life a very difficult struggle, they said.

"It is very hard to imagine the kind of life people are living under the occupation," said Ali Ajawhry. He and Awan said the withdrawal of U.S. troops is the only way to end the violent insurgency that has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of U.S. troops and thousands of Iraqis.

"We believe when the occupation troops are out, these people (insurgents) won't have this pretext to carry out their acts," Ali Ajawhry said. The creation of a new government split along religious and ethnic lines, also has exacerbated tensions, he said.





**Maxine Hughes of St. Paul, a member of Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 59, was among more than 300 people listening to the Iraqi labor leaders speak.**

***Union Advocate photo***

The labor movement is part of a secular, progressive movement that is working to rebuild Iraq – but it's not getting any help from the Bush administration, the two union leaders said. The unions have been working to get a labor code included in the new Iraqi constitution, but thus far have been shut out of the process, they said.

"I believe the secular movement does not lack the numbers – it lacks the organizing" and resources, Awan said. "The workers must participate in building this society."

The crowd at the program passed the hat to raise money for the Iraqi unions. Fundraising is taking place at each stop in the union leaders' two-week journey, organizers said.

Foster said the visit by the Iraqis illustrated the parallels between the Bush administration's anti-labor policies at home and its anti-labor practices abroad. He called on everyone to support worker rights in Iraq and take part in the discussion about the U.S. role in that country.

"We consider ourselves as an international movement," Awan said. "Any victory we achieve in Iraq will be a victory for all the international labor movement."

**For more information**

Visit the website of U.S. Labor Against the War,  
[www.uslaboragainstawar.org](http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org)

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