

Iraqi unionists

demand labor rights



Adnan Al Saffar

By JANE LaTOUR

Iraqi union leader Adnan Al Saffar brought a powerful anti-war message to the American labor movement June 17. "Trying to bring about change through launching a war cannot bring about ready-made democracy," he told 80 New York City unionists at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

The event took place under heightened security measures. Teamsters from Local 111 participated in the effort to ensure the safety of participants. Mr. Adnan said the Iraqi labor movement demands "withdrawal of all forces and all forms of occupation and the complete sovereignty of the Iraqi people."

An executive of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, he said that under Saddam Hussein, "The people were persecuted by the old regime and were banned from any labor activity." As the United States publicly considered invading, "The wounds of the Iraqi people were still open and burning. The trade union movement proposed a democratic alternative to war. Had we gone *this* way, we would see a different way than what is happening now."

War in Iraq

U.S. pushes privatization

Speaking through an interpreter, Mr. Adnan provided a short summary of events since the fall of Saddam Hussein. "After the dictatorship, about 350 trade unionists came together to form unions all over Iraq. Union activity is taking place in 18 provinces, but we face a very hostile position from the Americans," he said.

He described the anti-labor measures quickly enacted by the U.S.-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority, including privatization, efforts to import foreign workers while over 50 percent of Iraqi workers are unemployed, and a ban on collective bargaining for public employees.

"Mr. (Paul) Bremer, the first occupying governor, introduced these anti-labor measures," he continued. "We in the Iraqi trade union movement have drawn a red line in front of privatization. We are going to prevent this, no matter what sacrifices it takes."

In the oil sector, "American companies tried to bring in workers from Pakistan. The trade unionists threatened to shut down the whole industry and strike if workers from other



In June 17 address to New York unionists, Iraqi labor leader Adnan Al Saffar calls for U.S. to stop anti-labor moves there, such as privatization and ban on public sector bargaining.

countries were imported while Iraqi people are unemployed," he said.

He emphasized that self-determination is the top priority for Iraqi trade unionists. "The future of Iraq and its reconstruction depends on Iraqis and on controlling our national resources. Oil is a national Iraqi treasure, and we won't accept that anybody else will take control of it. This is a great resource for rebuilding Iraq."

"The Saddam Hussein regime banned labor activity. Today, union activity is taking place in 18 provinces of Iraq, but we face a hostile position from America: privatization, efforts to import foreign workers despite massive unemployment, and a ban on bargaining for public employees."

— Adnan Al Saffar

Representatives of 18 area unions attended the talk, which was hosted by the Global Labor Institute and Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

"The opportunity to have a dialogue with an elected leader from one of the three labor

federations in that beleaguered country is something that all unions can support," said Gene Carroll, director of Cornell's Union Leadership Program.

Mr. Adnan is one of five Iraqi trade unionists touring the U.S. They include representatives of the IFTU, the General Federation of Oil Employees and the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq. The tour is sponsored by a group of state labor federations, central labor councils and locals, and U.S. Labor Against the War. (For more information, visit www.uslaboragainsthewar.org.)

In the time allowed for questions and comments, Nick Ungar of the Transport Workers Union noted that many union members have been called to serve in Iraq. He presented Mr. Adnan with a TWU cap, in solidarity with the Iraqi labor movement.

Chris Shelton of the Communications Workers of America commented, "We have a dictator here too. His name is Bush and Bremer worked for him. Bush trying to destroy unionism in Iraq is no different from Bush trying to destroy it in America. We are committed to bringing discussion with the Iraqi unionists into the labor movement, and they will be speaking at the AFL-CIO Convention in July."