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Pittsburgh, Pa.

Wednesday, June 22, 2005

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Iraqi duo says unions needed in their homeland

Wednesday, June 22, 2005

By Jim McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In the midst of daily car bombings, power outages, food shortages and rising prices, Falah Alwan is pressing for a union movement in Iraq that he hopes will help improve living and working conditions made worse by the military conflict.



Tony Tye, Post-Gazette

Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils & Unions in Iraq, (far left) Amjad Al Jawhary, (middle), of the Union of Unemployed Iraqis, take part in a press conference at the United Steelworkers of America building with USWA attorney Dan Kovalik. The two Iraqis said foreign troops should withdraw from Iraq.

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But the fight is uphill, the president of the Federation of Workers Councils & Unions in Iraq said yesterday, moments before he addressed an audience at the United Steelworkers headquarters, Downtown.

"It is not only uphill, it is slippery. There is no rock to hold," Alwan said, his words translated into English by Amjad Al Jawhary, who represents both the federation and the Union of the Unemployed in Iraq in North America.

The two Iraqi trade unionists described a country in a state of anarchy and on the brink of civil war between religious groups.

Unemployment is very high and basic services are limited or nonexistent.

"It has been two years of this occupation, and we have been promised a lot of democracy, and we have been promised a lot of freedom, a lot of prosperity," Jawhary said. "However, we have seen everything but democracy, but freedom, but prosperity."

The pair called for an end to the U.S. and British occupation of Iraq and for the right to form and join unions that are democratic, free of government control and free of religious, political and other discrimination.

"We can take care of ourselves," Jawhary, an Iraqi exile who currently lives in Canada, said in arguing for the end of the current military

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occupation. "We don't need a baby sitter."

The two men are part of a national tour of Iraqi labor leaders sponsored by an organization called U.S. Labor Against the War. Their local visit was sponsored by the United Steelworkers, the Service Employees International Union District 1199P and the United Electrical Workers union.

Although the idea of unions in Iraq may seem unusual, they date back to the 1920s and 1930s, when oil and railway workers organized under the British. Unions played a role in the 1958 revolution, which led to a popular Iraqi government.

The Saddam Hussein regime, however, crushed the trade union movement in the 1970s. Unions -- outside of government sanctioned groups -- were banned in publicly owned industries including oil, power generation, printing, machine production, aviation and printing.

Alwan's federation was founded in 2003, after the conflict started, by workers councils that grew out of the Union of Unemployed Iraqis, a network of people who operated in several cities to seek jobs or benefits for the unemployed.

Alwan, a trained engineer who refused to sign a pledge of loyalty to Saddam Hussein, was an underground union organizer in factories and the construction trades after the first Gulf war. Jawhary, a Baghdad native, was blacklisted by the regime for his political views and for attempting to organize sewing workers. He has lived in Canada for several years.

Jawhary described an Iraq where basic services such as electricity, health care and clean water are in short supply -- an insufferable situation compounded by everyday security hazards. He said his own father died at age 65 when he could not get to a hospital quickly enough after a heart attack because travel was curtailed by an 11 p.m. curfew.

Water is available two hours a day and electricity for four -- a hardship in the summer when the temperature can reach 110 degrees, Jawhary said.

"It's very hot. It's very dry, and you need something to cool you off," he said. "That's is why people are very agitated."

They are seeking to repeal a 1987 law prohibiting workers in state-owned enterprises from joining unions. As many as half of Iraq's 6.5 million-member work force are employed by the state.

The labor leaders also fear the newly elected government may slash budgets and government jobs, and that a move to privatize Iraq's state-owned industries will only increase unemployment that already stands at 31 percent officially but, the said, is closer to 70 percent.

They want to participate in the writing of a new secular constitution and are calling for updated labor laws that would protect workers from the negative effects of privatization and provide them with education and medical care.

And they believe that the Iraqi oil industry, which accounts for 70 percent of the economy, should remain publicly owned, with profits used to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure, public services and educational institutions.

Saying that wages have fallen since the war, Jawhary predicted that Iraq could become a destination for outsourced labor from the United States if privatization proceeds and creates a huge pool of unemployed workers willing to work for low wages. "This will affect workers in the United States," he said. "It is a mutual impact."

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