

CALL FOR FREEDOM

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Two leaders from one of Iraq's most powerful labor unions visited San Jose on Sunday as part of a national tour to publicize the plight of working people in occupied Iraq.

The top leaders of the General Union of Oil Employees, which was banned along with other independent unions by Saddam Hussein, called for Iraqi self-determination and an end to the U.S. occupation.

“The American administration claims it is bringing democracy and freedom and human rights to Iraq,” said Hassan Juma'a Awad Al Asade, chief of the union's executive branch. “This is the third year of occupation and we see no improvement in our situation.”

While most Iraqis were happy to see Saddam go, he said through an interpreter, they have come to see U.S. forces as occupiers, not liberators.

He and Fleh Abbood Umara, general secretary of the oil workers' union, are part of a six-member delegation of Iraqi trade unionists who are traveling to more than 20 cities in the United States. Last week, the group met with members of Congress to discuss support for greater involvement of Iraqi unions in rebuilding Iraq.

About 80 peace activists and union members attended the presentation at the headquarters of the Service Employees International Union Local 715 in San Jose. Afterward, the Iraqi leaders were whisked away to speak in Berkeley.

The tour is sponsored by U.S. Labor Against the War, a coalition of 110 union and labor groups that is spending \$50,000 to take the Iraqis around the country.

Both Juma'a Awad Al Asade and Fleh Abbood Umara are longtime oil workers who were imprisoned for human rights and union activities by Saddam's government.

Although labor unions have a long history dating to the 1920s in Iraq, they were banned from state-owned enterprises in 1987, through Law 150. Most of Iraqi industry -- especially such important sectors as oil, electricity and ports -- were owned by the state under Saddam.

The unions were meeting in secret before Saddam fell, but resurfaced publicly in 2003 shortly after the occupation began, said Abbood Umara.

Although Law 150 remains on the books, unions have become increasingly active and influential. For example, Abbood Umara said, oil workers won higher wages after pay

was lowered by the Conditional Provisional Authority. They also won concessions after going on strike to protest the use of many foreign workers at a refinery being operated by KBR, a subcontractor of Halliburton.

With unemployment rates reaching 50 percent to 75 percent, Juma'a Awad Al Asade spoke of the need for labor laws, social security and unemployment insurance.

The Iraqis spoke out strongly against U.S. efforts to privatize all Iraqi businesses except for the oil industry. Among other things, workers fear privatization would drive high unemployment even higher.

“Privatization is a kind word but the substance of it is to transfer public property to private property,” said Juma'a Awad Al Asade. “People with wealth and capital will go up, and the rest of the classes will go down and there will be elimination of the middle class.”