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Iraqi labor leaders fight for rights

By Alexandra Klaren

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Washington, DC, Jun. 9 (UPI) -- Iraqi labor leaders plan to meet with U.S. lawmakers and other officials to drum up support for greater workers' rights in Iraq, organizers say.

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"This is a chance for people in the U.S., especially working people, to hear from Iraqis themselves about what they want to have happen with their country," David Bacon, a labor journalist and co-organizer of the tour, told United Press International. "Unions are a fundamental building block of Iraqi civil society and if Iraq is going to become a democratic country, trade unions must play a very important role in determining what direction that is."

The group, invited by U.S. Labor Against The War, a Washington-based non-governmental organization, arrives in Washington Friday to begin a June 10-24

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national tour that takes them to 20 cities. Members from the Iraqi Federations of Trade Unions, the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, and General Union of Oil Employees plan to meet with U.S. workers, union leaders, members of Congress and others to seek help for greater rights in Iraq.

"We have more resources than them," Bacon said. "They could use the help of U.S. unions and working people in terms of trying to change their status."

President Bush, in his 2004 State of the Union address, said he would send Congress a proposal to double the budget of the National Endowment for Democracy, a body created in 1983 to work with pro-democracy groups around the world through non-governmental efforts.

"I will send you (Congress) a proposal to double the budget of the National Endowment for Democracy, and to focus its new work on the development of free elections, and free markets, free press, and free labor unions in the Middle East," he said. "And above all, we will finish the historic work of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, so those nations can light the way for others, and help transform a troubled part of the world."

Despite his statements, however, laws that prohibit labor organizing still exist in Iraq.

When the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority took over Iraq following the ouster of President Saddam Hussein in 2003, chief L. Paul Bremer implemented 100 orders that repealed a huge chunk of the Iraqi legal structure. Not on the list, however - as noted by Matthew Harwood in the April 2005 issue of the Washington Monthly -- was Saddam's 1987 Labor Code, which reclassified workers of large state enterprises, the majority of Iraqi workers, as civil servants, denying them the right to form unions in the public sector.

"Much of the CPA's effort in Baghdad was devoted to helping create a conservative's ideal state, complete with a 15-percent flat tax on individual and corporate income,"

Harwood wrote.

Gene Bruskin, a USLAW co-convener, said there was some language in the transitional law that says unions should have a right to organize, but there was no implementation.

"Iraq's economy is organized around basic industries that are publicly owned so if you have a clause in the transitional law that says that unions have a right to organize but public employees don't, it's a meaningless clause," he told UPI.

Iraqi labor leaders have made significant efforts in working with the U.N.-backed International Labor Organization to develop a new labor code that they hope will be a part of the new Iraqi constitution, which is still on the drawing board.

"I think it's broadly recognized by virtually every democratic leader and government and society in the world that you cannot have democracy without free trade unions," Bruskin said. "And so we think it's really important for people in the U.S. to hear directly from Iraqis, and these Iraqis in particular, because they represent secular, democratic, progressive voices."

Of almost equal concern to Iraqi workers is the issue of privatization. Later in his article, Harwood wrote, "Bremer's crew was so zealous that they tried, in September 2003, to privatize virtually the whole economy -- 200 state-owned firms."

Since the new Iraqi government has come to power, these ideas have found new life. According to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Iraqi Industry Minister Mohammed Abdullah, following Iraq's new strategy to create a liberal free-market economy, recently drew up plans to partially privatize the majority of Iraq's 45 state-owned companies, including its lucrative oil sector.

Supporters of the minister's plan say it will help Iraq become a competitive economy.

"I think what they (the new Iraqi government) are talking about is opening up the economy to private investment of Iraqis

and foreign investment in order to provide the capital for more rapid economic growth and that would benefit all Iraqis including Iraqi oil workers," James Phillips, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank, told UPI.

The six Iraqi labor leaders who arrive in Washington Friday, say, however, the plan will lead to job losses as new private owners may seek to reduce labor costs by cutting the work force. They argue the money necessary to rebuild Iraq must come from the heart of the country's economy: the oil industry.

"Any funds for the reconstruction of Iraq, everything from schools and hospitals to rebuilding the industry itself, essentially has to be paid for out of that oil income," Bacon said. Privatization, he says, would be disadvantageous because "most of the oil would go to the multinationals rather than to the Iraqis."



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