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By Darren Allen

Iraqi workers' plight strikes a chord in Vt.

Adnan Rashed spent years in exile when labor unions were outlawed in his native Iraq. The 56-year-old was a prime mover in the Workers' Democratic Trade Union Movement, which was a giant thorn in the side of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Rashed returned home shortly after the end of Hussein's brutal regime which murdered thousands of workers and promptly got to work organizing fellow laborers. The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, on whose executive council he sits, is now 200,000 strong, with workers from all walks of Iraqi life.

It's an impressive accomplishment in an occupied country brutalized first by a madman dictator and now, for three years, by the ravages of war. Organizing labor in a country where 70 percent of the workforce is unemployed, and in which unions had been outlawed for nearly three decades, is a daunting task.

Rashed was in the United States last week to talk about what he and fellow workers face in Iraq.

But, more importantly, his planned visit to Vermont he was expected to attend a potluck supper in Montpelier on Saturday night should give us pause about the state of labor worldwide and about the delicate thread by which most of the world's workers hang onto a sustainable livelihood.

"The state of labor has only gotten worse," said Dawn Stanger, vice president of the Vermont Workers' Center, a member of the Teamsters union and a 16-year employee of United Parcel Service. "Someone else has used the line, 'trade unions are the canary in the coal mines.'"

And the canary is dying. In Iraq, the signs are obvious and not wholly unexpected.

According to Vermont Labor Against the War the workers' center is part of the group the war and occupation have brought on "the illegalization of their unions, the imminent threat of the privatization of

most of the public sector by foreign corporations and a 70 percent unemployment rate."

The signs are obvious here, too. Union membership is at an all-time low in this country, driven in part by hard-line bargaining by multinational corporations who routinely decide that workers are expendable "assets."

Promised pensions are being yanked, wages are stagnant and government is increasingly hostile to workers.

A perfect example of that right here in Vermont is the recent fight over the elimination of an early retirement program that had been a part of the benefits package promised to full-time faculty at the Vermont State Colleges.

In addition to losing a retirement option a disturbing and far-too-common trend in American businesses the professors bore the brunt of name-calling by Gov. James Douglas.

He suggested that professors were receiving a too-generous benefit that was no longer affordable. He called them "big labor" and "special interests." And he excoriated their political benefactors for having the temerity to stand up to the eradication of worker security.

On a national level, the current political leadership is indifferent to labor most of the time, and, when it comes to issues such as wages, benefits and trade, it is downright hostile.

In Iraq, Rashed and his fellow workers are living under the shadow of Washington-forced economic and political policies that are not bringing stability or security to vast swaths of people.

To Stanger, Rashed should not be fighting against the interests of America and its multi-billion dollar corporations. She said, unions should be exploited for what they are best at fostering: a democratic lifting of their members' economic boats.

"I think we've given the troops in Iraq an impossible mission," Stanger said. "You can't push democracy, it has to rise from within. Trade unions are an effective way of doing that."

I think the reverse also is true. In America, ignoring the plight of workers can only serve to weaken our own democracy.

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