

Iraqi labor leader calls for troop withdrawal

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U.S. assistance has helped Iraq build a democracy, but troops should leave now so a truly free, self-governing Iraq can emerge, Iraqi union leader Adnan A. Rashed told a crowd Sunday in Burlington.

Speaking through interpreter Maher Elhashami, the 56-year-old Rashed was the featured guest at a rally following an anti-war march along Church Street to City Hall Park. About 70 people marched, chanted and listened to Rashed, an executive officer with the Union of Mechanics, Printing and Metals Workers.

"Our job right now is to right the equation in Iraq," Rashed said. "We demand for our freedom and sovereignty as Iraqis."

Rashed is one of six leaders of Iraq's emerging trade-union movement who are spending two weeks touring the United States, a visit coordinated by U.S. Labor Against the War. Vermont labor groups organized two local stops, one Saturday in Montpelier and the other Sunday in Burlington.

Former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein outlawed unions in the 1970s, a move that forced labor organizers into exile or underground, according to U.S. Labor Against the War. Rashed spent 2 years in hiding in Iraq, and another 2 years in exile in Syria, he said. Hundreds or thousands of fellow labor activists were killed, he said.

After U.S. forces toppled Saddam's regime in 2003, trade unions regrouped and exiled leaders, including Rashed, returned. He lives in Baghdad, he said, where he works as part of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.

Sunday's event started at noon outside the Unitarian Universalist church at the top of Church Street. The crowd began marching toward City Hall.

"No justice! No peace! U.S. out of the Middle East!" people chanted.

Curious Church Street shoppers and diners looked on as the group, including Rashed, marched past. One man carrying an obscenity-laced sign referring to President George W. Bush drew applause and disgusted rebukes from onlookers.

Mayor Peter Clavelle greeted the marchers at City Hall Park and welcomed Rashed. Two city police officers watched the proceedings.

Rashed said that truly representative government and fair labor practices in Iraq can

occur only after the U.S. military leaves. The United States has helped democratic government emerge in a country once ruled by Saddam's "most horrible regime," Rashed said.

"Your support is very important so as to help us be a free country," he said.

Vermont union leaders also spoke, voicing their opposition to the U.S.-led war. Labor leader Ellen David Friedman said the anti-war viewpoint is shared by a majority of Americans. Jonathan Kissam, secretary and treasurer of the United Electrical Workers of America Local 221, said U.S. unions are in solidarity with their Iraqi counterparts. That support, Kissam said, is necessary because of an expanding corporate culture.

"We are facing enemies with a global vision of privatization and endless war," he said.

Rashed praised the relationship between Iraqis and Americans.

"We will stay friends," he said, "no matter how many tanks in Iraq and how many people get killed."

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