

Tour of Iraqi Labor Leaders Gives American Workers a Closer Look

by Nancy Romer and Michael Zweig August 2005

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For two weeks in June, six Iraqi union leaders from three major labor federations toured the US sponsored by U.S. Labor Against the War. USLAW, a coalition of over 100 labor organizations ranging from state federations to locals and regional groups, organized events in 26 cities.

The main goal was to personalize the struggles of Iraqi workers by having Iraqi labor leaders speak for themselves, expressing their opposition to the occupation, privatization of industry, and massive unemployment. The tour showed that there is another force present in Iraq other than the suicide bombers and U.S. military, ready to build a democratic society free from occupation and terror.

The three trade union federations represented on the tour were the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), the General Union of Oil employees (GUOE), and the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

Two leaders from each group kept grueling schedules that had them meeting with groups of union members, anti-war activists, and congressional leaders from across the country.

CONTINUING THE FIGHT

They talked about their opposition to the former regime of Saddam Hussein, as well as to the occupation and the terrorism it has engendered in Iraq. They spoke of their struggle for the right to organize free and independent trade unions for all workers in Iraq. The U.S. occupation has kept in place Saddam Hussein's law prohibiting unions in government and public sector enterprises, which constitute 70 percent of the labor force.

The Iraqi unionists' first stop was Washington, D.C., where they met with USLAW leaders and the leadership of the Service Employees and Communication Workers unions. They conducted a briefing for congressional representatives and met with AFL-CIO leaders, including President John Sweeney.

They also participated in community-based events, including a spirited Sunday morning in the predominantly African American Plymouth Congregational Church, led by Reverend Grayland Hagler.

JOINT DECLARATION OF U.S. AND IRAQI UNIONISTS

The following is an excerpt of the joint statement of USLAW and Iraqi trade union representatives. For the full text in English and Arabic, as well as photos, and media coverage of the Iraqi unionists' tour, go to [US Labor Against the War](#).

We speak in the spirit of international solidarity and respect for labor rights around the

world. We speak in the spirit of opposition to war and occupation and the right of self-determination of nations and peoples....

We are strengthened in our understanding of the deep commitment of organized labor and workers in Iraq to a unified, democratic, independent Iraq, with full equality between women and men in terms of rights and duties, and based on full respect for the human identity without discrimination on any basis.

With the strength and solidarity of workers across the US, in Iraq and internationally, we are confident that we can build a just and democratic future for labor in Iraq, the US, and around the world.”

After the D.C. stop, the unionists divided into separate teams: the IFTU representatives traveled on the East Coast, the GUOE on the West Coast, and the FWCUI in the Midwest and. They participated in 70 events, held 10 press conferences, and received extensive local media coverage.

QUESTIONS

In several venues, the Iraqi labor leaders spoke side-by-side with members of Iraq Veterans Against the War and Military Families Speak Out. Audience questions ranged from working conditions in Iraq to the position of women in the Iraqi labor movement.

Some activists raised sharp questions over the IFTU’s stance on the occupation. Adnan al-Saffar, principal IFTU representative on the tour, explained that there are differences of opinion in his organization, but reaffirmed that the IFTU’s official position is “opposition to both [Saddam’s] dictatorship and the occupation.”

In a rare moment of leisure in New York City, al-Saffar asked to see the Statue of Liberty. As we passed Lady Liberty on the Staten Island ferry, he said, “Liberty is important but it cannot be imposed.”

On the final day of the tour, the Iraqi unionists and USLAW leaders hammered out a joint statement (see box) that clearly identifies the occupation as the “principal obstacle to peace, stability, and the reconstruction of Iraq [which] must end in all its forms, including military bases and economic domination.”

OBSTACLES

USLAW’s decision to bring the Iraqi union leaders to the U.S. was fraught with challenges every step of the way. First, it was a struggle to get visas for the Iraqis: despite the largest U.S. embassy in the world in Baghdad, no Iraqi national can apply for a visa there. They each had to travel to Jordan up to three times before their visas were approved, finally requiring help from members of Congress.

The tour required enormous human and financial resources, involving hundreds of

USLAW activists all over the country and costing tens of thousands of dollars, raised from sponsoring unions, labor councils, and state federations across the country and by passing the hat at each event.

As this article goes to press, USLAW affiliates are preparing a resolution for the AFL-CIO convention calling for an immediate end to the war and occupation. Large unions on both sides of the restructuring debates dividing the AFL- have already passed such resolutions.

Whatever happens in Chicago at the end of July, the tour of Iraqi labor leaders in the United States will have a long-lasting effect as a source of energy and purpose for the anti-war movement in the United States. The existence of a strong, dynamic democratic labor movement in Iraq provides one of the essential building blocks for a sovereign democratic Iraq, free of foreign occupation and domination.

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The tour was an expression of the following key principles:

The principal obstacle to peace, stability, and the reconstruction of Iraq is the occupation.... Iraqi sovereignty and independence must be restored. The occupation must end in all its forms, including military bases and economic domination.

We strongly and unambiguously condemn terrorist attacks on civilians and targeting of trade union and other civil society leaders for intimidation, kidnapping, torture and assassination.

The national wealth and resources of Iraq belong to the Iraqi people.

The bedrock of any democracy is a strong, free, democratic labor movement.

We commit ourselves to strengthening the bonds of solidarity and friendship between working people of our two countries and to increase communication and cooperation between our two labor movements.