

Iraqi trade unionists want U.S. to get out

By Kathy Wilkes
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Iraqi trade unionists are touring the United States through next week as part of an outreach and solidarity effort organized by U.S. Labor Against the War, a broad coalition of American labor unions opposed to the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Iraqi officials represent three key trade union organizations - the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq and the General Union of Oil Employees.

The tour schedule includes two meetings in Wisconsin on Monday, in Madison and Milwaukee. The meetings are open to the public so that Americans can "talk with representatives of Iraq's labor movement who are fighting for a progressive, secular and democratic future," U.S. Labor Against the War says.

"Fighting" is the operative word here. Even with Saddam Hussein behind bars and almost all of his regime's repressive laws eliminated, Iraqi unions are still under siege - from a military/industrial occupation that wants to suppress them for advocating workplace justice, and a lethal insurgency that wants to kill them for advocating democracy.

"All three of the union federations we invited have been targets of the occupation," USLAW reports. "The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions had its offices raided and trashed by occupation forces and its leaders have been arrested and harassed. Its leaders have been kidnapped, tortured and assassinated by elements of the insurgency that clearly do not support or care about the rights of workers.

"All three federations continue to be subject to the 1987 Hussein decree banning unions in the public sector and public enterprises ... All three organizations continue to call for enforcement of the (U.N.'s International Labor Organization) standards that would allow workers to freely choose which organization should represent them and have struggled to create a labor law that provides genuine trade union rights for workers in Iraq."

As Matthew Harwood wrote in his article "Pinkertons at the CPA," published in Washington Monthly, "Iraqi labor officials (are) kidnapped and killed with impunity by the insurgents because the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions supports a secular state, representative of Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurd. Its leaders have called for the insurgency to end. The union has endorsed U.N. Resolution 1546, which sets the timetable for Iraq's transition into a democracy."

Yet the Bush administration, which claims that its objective is to bring democracy to the people of Iraq, "not only declined to engage the labor movement in the process of building a nation, but also worked actively to undermine labor's ability to play a constructive role," Harwood wrote.

Iraqi trade unionists are outraged, Ghasib Hassan, a member of the executive committee of the Iraqi union federation, told photojournalist David Bacon in an interview earlier this year:

"We oppose the occupation absolutely. It's led to the total destruction of the economic infrastructure of Iraq, with the aim of controlling its wealth and resources. ... The Iraqi people are calling today, not tomorrow, for the removal of the occupation. ...

"On a daily basis, at least 10-15 people die (as) a result of terrorism, but terrorism wasn't present prior to the war. You can see that the U.S. administration has imported terrorism into Iraq in order to fight it, but at the expense of the Iraqi people. ...

"At the beginning of the 21st century, we thought we'd seen the end of colonies, but now we're entering a new era of colonialization. We are campaigning to end the occupation of Iraq, to build a democratic, federal Iraq which will guarantee the rights and jobs of its people."

Americans have written and discussed so much about Iraq; now we have a fabulous opportunity - indeed, an obligation - to hear what Iraqis have to say. For more information about the tour, see USLAW's Web site at <http://uslaboragainstar.org/index.php>.