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TOUR DE WORKFORCE

Iraqi union leaders visit Portland.

BY ADRIAN CHEN

The emergence of the General Union of Oil Employees in post-Saddam Iraq presents a paradox: The U.S. occupation brought the freedom needed to organize, but the group remains illegal and much of its work directly opposes U.S. interests.

Tonight, Portlanders can hear firsthand accounts of the precarious situation for the oil employees' union and other unions in a new Iraq—a topic that otherwise gets little attention amid all the political disputes over the war.

Hassan Juma'a Awad and Faleh Abbood Umara founded the GUOE in April 2003, after the U.S. occupation began. Though oil unions are technically illegal under the provisional government, that hasn't stopped the group—which claims 23,000 members—from fighting for higher worker wages and against increased privatization of Iraq's oil industry by multinational corporations.

The two Iraqis, speaking tonight at Portland State University, are part of a six-member delegation of Iraqi union leaders touring the country under the sponsorship of U.S. Labor Against the War. But the Portland event is not meant as an anti-war protest, says Jean Eilers, a spokeswoman for Oregon AFL-CIO—one of more than 50 local sponsors.

"Union workers here face the same sort of battles [as Iraqi workers]," Eilers says. "Forming a union is a very difficult thing to do. Anti-labor organizing...is big, and it comes from many different sides. We see that here just as in Iraq.... We share this belief that any kind of democracy needs a free labor movement."

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