

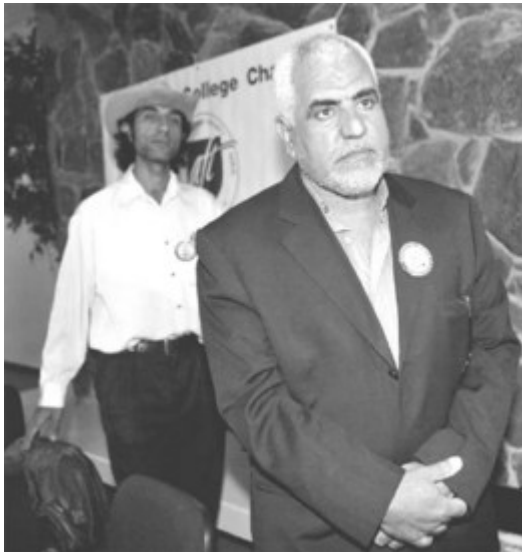
Found at: <http://www.pww.org/article/articleprint/7267/>

Iraqi labor leaders welcomed across U.S.

Author: [Susan Webb](#)

People's Weekly World Newspaper, 06/23/05 12:25

Six Iraqi union leaders touring the U.S. this week called for an end to the U.S. occupation and expressed hope that American workers would support their efforts to protect Iraqi workers' rights and defeat privatization. U.S. Labor Against the War sponsored the 17-day, 25-city tour by the representatives of three major labor organizations in Iraq.



Hassan Juma'a Awad, president of Iraq's General Union of Oil Employees, at a June 16 meeting at Los Angeles Valley College hosted by AFT Local 1521.

The delegation met with AFL-CIO President John Sweeney June 14. Earlier, they met with the AFL-CIO's international affairs staff and were guests at a brown-bag lunch the federation hosted. The AFL-CIO has invited the three Iraqi labor groups to attend its convention in July.

The Iraqi unionists also met with Communication Workers President Morton Bahr and with top Service Employees union officials.

On Capitol Hill, the delegation spoke at a congressional briefing sponsored by Democratic Reps. Sam Farr, John Conyers Jr., Lynn Woolsey, Barbara Lee, Dennis Kucinich and Jesse Jackson Jr.

At a Washington press conference, Faleh Abbood Umara, general secretary of the Basra-based General Union of Oil Employees, said the U.S. occupation aims "to manipulate and control the Iraqi economy in the interests of the American government. We will oppose it all the way."

Adnan A. Rashed, executive officer of the Union of Mechanics, Printing and Metals Workers, representing the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, said, "In the Iraqi labor movement, we made it clear that change through war will produce

complex issues and not bring democracy.” Addressing the U.S. labor movement, he said, “We expect you to put pressure on your own government, added to what we are doing, to get rid of the occupation forces.”

Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq, noted that, with unemployment as high as 70 percent in Iraq and steep wage and benefit cuts imposed by the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority, the employers’ strongest weapon against workers seeking to organize is to threaten them with replacement by the unemployed.

A key demand is revocation of Saddam Hussein’s 1987 law barring unionization of the public sector, which still includes most of the Iraqi economy, notably the oil industry, as well as anti-labor edicts issued by U.S. occupation boss, Paul Bremer. The unions want a labor code drafted by the unions themselves.

Gene Bruskin, a USLAW co-convenor, said an emotional high point in Washington was a gathering at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, a largely African American church, whose minister, the Rev. Graylan Hagler, is an outspoken peace and social justice advocate. Moved by Hagler’s remarks, the Iraqi labor leaders jumped up with tears in their eyes and hugged him.

In New York, a labor breakfast June 17 with 50 U.S. trade unionists was followed by a meeting with religious and community leaders hosted by United for Peace and Justice, and an evening panel with 250 union and peace activists. The IFTU’s Rashed said the U.S. occupation has brought “the destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure, Iraqi institutions, civil service and the whole fabric of society.”

“The Iraqi people have all the resources, qualities, education, expertise to rebuild Iraq,” he said. “We will not accept the hegemony of a foreign power.”

The IFTU includes 12 unions in 15 provinces and three unions in Iraqi Kurdistan. Besides ending the occupation, Rashed said, “Our three economic fronts are to confront all privatization, the introduction of market economy and the intervention of international institutions like the World Bank.”

In Chicago, Alwan and Amjad Ali Aljawhry of the FWCUI told a June 17 meeting of some 200 labor and peace activists hosted by UNITE HERE that the Iraqi labor movement “has its own alternative” to the occupation. “We are establishing a new labor tradition,” Alwan said. “I will not exaggerate — this is the first time we are electing representatives and leaders. The tradition in Iraq was to have unions under total regime control.”

“In order to build a secular and progressive labor movement,” Alwan said, “we need the world labor movement to stand by us.” He urged an immediate end to the U.S. occupation as an important first step. The Iraqi unionists also spoke at Rainbow/

PUSH the next morning.

In Berkeley, Calif., June 19, over 250 people at St. Joseph the Worker Roman Catholic Church heard Umara and GUOE President Hassan Juma’a Awad describe their struggle to regain union rights and conditions. Having reconstituted their union just 11 days after the U.S. takeover of Baghdad in April 2003, the GUOE defeated contracting firm KBR’s effort to take over the worksites they represent. KBR is a Halliburton subsidiary. A three-day strike in August 2003 won the workers a doubling of their wages. Despite the lack of official recognition, the union now has 23,000 members at 10 oil and gas companies.

The Iraqi unionists also spoke before three Bay Area central labor councils and at events organized by International Longshore and Warehouse Union locals.

USLAW’s Bruskin told the World the Iraqi labor delegation “captured the imagination of hundreds of trade unionists” who worked on the many events around the country. The tour “reached out beyond our usual audience,” he said, giving labor activism against the war “some real credibility.” A resolution opposing the occupation is expected to be presented at the upcoming AFL-CIO convention.

suewebb@pww.org

Mark AlMBERG, Marilyn Bechtel, Libero Della Piana and PAI news service contributed to this story.

| [Back to normal page view](#) | [Send this article to a friend](#) |