

OPEN FORUM



Defiant: A worker at Iraq's state leather industry factory denounces the ban on unions. Many workers view organizing as their right after years under dictatorship. As Chasib Hassan, general secretary of the Union for Aviation and Railway Workers and member of the executive committee of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, explained: "The IFTU was established soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein, by trade unionists who had been in exile or prison, who are very well known because of their struggle against the former regime. They paid heavily and suffered terribly. . . . We began going out to factories. We formed committees in workplaces, and people nominated and elected their representatives freely. We are building a trade union movement which is independent, democratic and pluralist. Workers should be free to join the union of their own choice. We campaign for social, economic and political advances in the interest of working people. We want a federal, prosperous and democratic Iraq. Women should take their place in society, government and trade unions. Their wages should be equal to those of men. We've built 12 national unions, and women are leaders of some."

Iraqi unions claim their voice

Photographs
and text by
David Bacon

FOR most Americans, the idea that Iraq has unions is a strange concept. We have become accustomed to seeing images of soldiers and bombs, while Iraq's working families have little visibility and are given little consideration in U.S. policy debates.

Yet Iraq, a country of 24 million people, has a long history of civic and labor activism dating back to the 1920s, when the British dug the first oil wells, and oil workers organized their first unions. They weren't legal then — in fact, the British shot strikers in one of Iraq's first labor confrontations. They're not legal now, either.

Saddam Hussein, fearing a progressive movement to topple his dictatorship, banned unions for public workers in 1987. Iraq's public sector includes all its largest industries — oil, railroads, ports and big factories.

When the occupation began, however, U.S. authorities refused to repeal that law, despite promises of democracy. Instead, chief occupation administrator Paul Bremer issued Public Order 30 in September, 2003, to privatize Iraq's state-owned industries. Bush fund-raiser Thomas Foley drew up lists of factories, airlines, railroads, mines and other enterprises to be sold to private investors, including foreign corporations. Despite last January's elections, that program is still on the books.

Iraqi workers adamantly oppose privatization, since it would lead to massive job loss in a country already suffering 70 percent unemployment, according to economists at Baghdad University. To Iraqi unions, denying them legal status is a way to keep them weak in the face of the occupation's economic program.

Yet Iraqi unions — despite lacking

legal status and often being the targets of the occupation on the one hand and terrorists on the other —

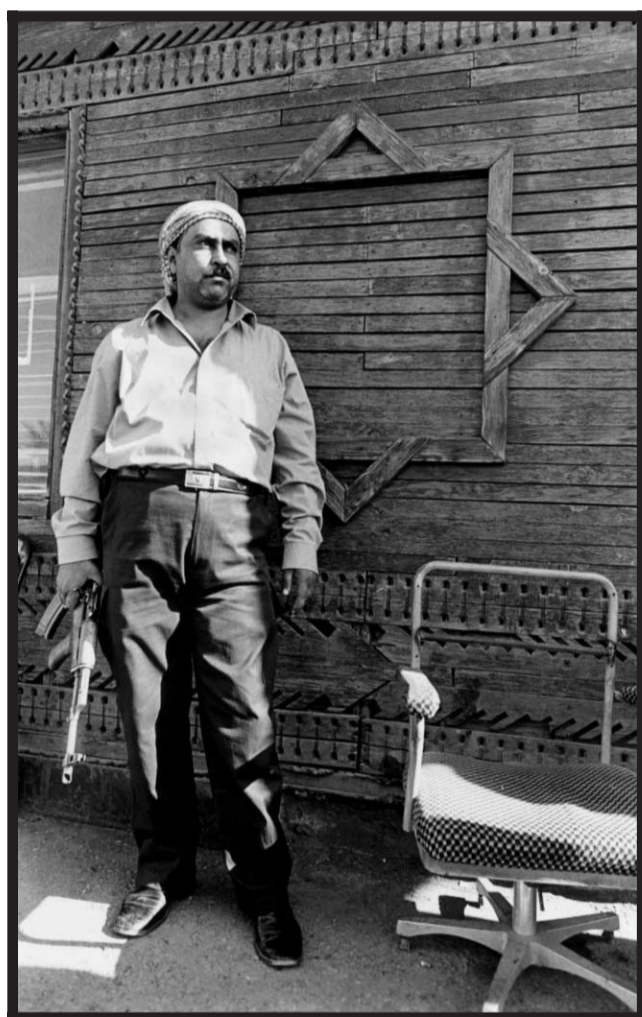
have begun winning better conditions for workers. Hundreds of thousands of workers have joined, making unions the largest institution in Iraqi civil society.

Oil workers recently held a large congress in Basra, to voice their opposition to privatizing oil, or selling it to transnational corporations at discounted prices. Oil income, they said, is needed to rebuild their country. Their union calls for keeping public assets in public hands. It also calls for an end to the occupation, and the withdrawal of U.S., British and other foreign troops. Today, Iraq has several union federations. They don't always agree on everything, but on these two points, they see eye-to-eye.

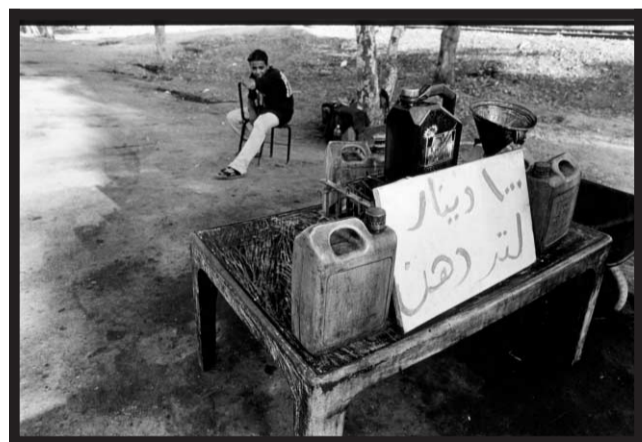
Most Americans hope that the occupation will end too, replaced by a progressive government that will raise living standards and ensure a democratic and peaceful future. The war deprives working families in the United States of the money needed for education and public services, and it sends their children into harm's way. Yet instead of bringing prosperity and peace to Iraqis, the war has brought the opposite. Working families in both countries want the same thing.

That makes it important to seek out the voices of Iraq's unions, its women's, professional and student organizations, and hear what they have to say. Their voice is missing in the debate over the future of their country.

David Bacon, a reporter and photographer who specializes in labor issues, is author of "The Children of NAFTA" (University of California Press, 2004).



Vigilant: The guard at the gate of the Al Daura oil refinery prevents unauthorized entry. The plant's manager armed 300 workers after the fall of Saddam Hussein; they now provide him, in effect, with a squad to enforce his decisions.



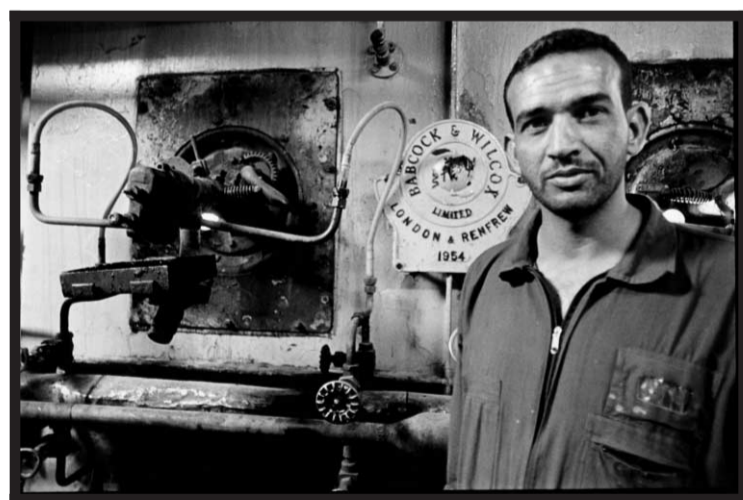
Free market: The son of a refinery worker at the Al Daura refinery sells motor oil to cars passing along the highway outside the refinery. His father receives the oil as compensation for his low pay.



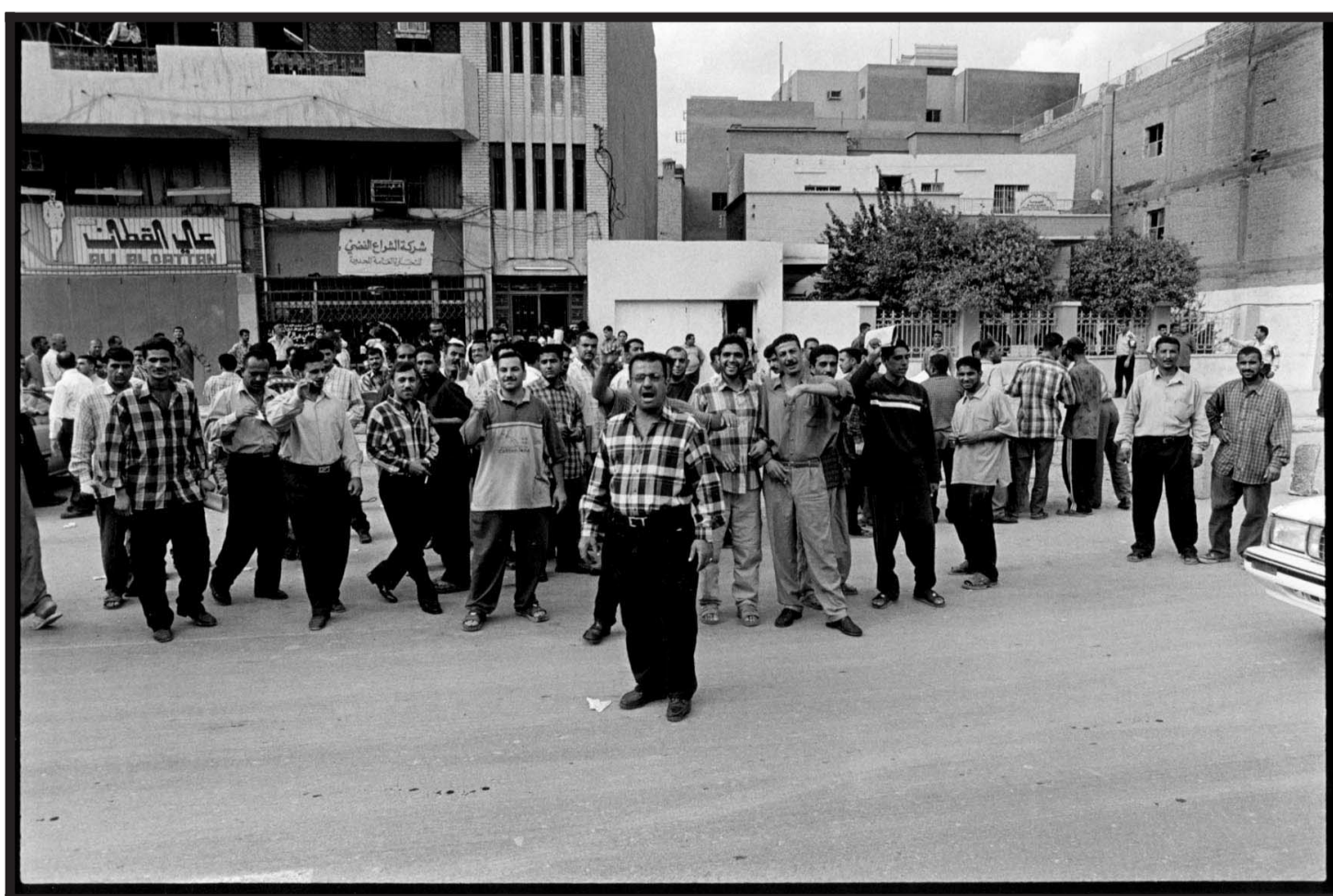
Determined: A woman operates a sewing machine at Iraq's leather industry factory, where, according to Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq, "the administration also threatened to arrest workers. . . . But they organized two strikes in January in spite of that."



Key indicator: The gas flare at the Al Daura refinery (above) is visible throughout Baghdad, where residents monitor its flame as a sign that the refinery, key to Iraq's economy, is working.



Making do: The furnace tender (above) for the boilers of the power plant in the Al Daura oil refinery must use rags to turn the hot valves of machinery that was imported from Europe, much of it decades ago.



Discontented: Unemployed police officers (left) demonstrate outside the office of a contractor who reneged on promises of work. Such activism is resurgent in Iraq, even though the U.S. occupying authority never rescinded the law banning unions. According to Hassan Juma'a Awad, president of the General Union of Oil Workers, "Without organizing ourselves, we would be unable to protect our industry, which we have been looking after for generations. . . . The authorities kept saying that according to this law we had no legitimacy, no right to represent workers in the oil sector. As far as we're concerned, we were elected by the workers. That's the only kind of legitimacy we need. I was elected president of our union in a democratic and free election."

Learn more

Who: Representatives of Iraq's General Union of Oil Workers — Hassan Juma'a Awad Al Asade, president, and Faleh Abboud Umara, general secretary

What: Informational talks, followed by audience Q&A

When: June 19, 1:30 p.m. and 6:45 p.m.

Where: 1:30 p.m. event: SEIU Local 715, 2302 Zanker Rd. (between Brokaw and Trimble streets), San Jose; 6:45 p.m. event: St. Joseph the Worker Church, 1640 Addison (between Jefferson and McGee streets), Berkeley.

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