



## The Oregonian

### Iraqi oil workers lament lack of jobs

**Portland activists and labor leaders hear two visitors talk of hurdles for unions, the toll from war and violence**

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Two Iraqi labor leaders who visited Portland on Wednesday know firsthand that Iraqis still desperately need jobs despite U.S. efforts to fix their battered country.

"Where are these job opportunities? I have three daughters, all college graduates, sitting at home," said Hassan Juma'a Awad Al Asade, an oil worker on a visit to the Port of Portland.

Later, at Portland City Hall, Faleh Abbood Umara, another oil worker, said his 21-year-old daughter is also without a job, but optimistically noted that she soon will marry and move out of his house.

Part of a national tour by Iraqi labor leaders, Al Asade, 53, and Umara, 47, both leaders of Iraq's General Union of Oil Employees, spent the day in Portland meeting with activists and labor leaders.

Oregon longshoremen welcomed the Iraqis with a pledge to work together globally to thwart any anti-worker efforts of multinational corporations or President Bush.

"Your struggle is our struggle," said Leal Sundet, president of Local 8 of the International Longshoreman's and Warehousemen's Union. "It is the same government and the same corporations that are exploiting you that exploit us."

Tim Nesbitt, president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, told the Iraqis that any democratic movement needs to include the right of workers to organize and form unions.

Speaking through translators, the two gray-haired Iraqis -- Al Asade sporting a neatly trimmed beard and a short-sleeved shirt, Umara wearing glasses and a long-sleeved shirt with a button reading "Workers' rights are human rights" -- recounted the struggle of Iraqi labor unions, which Saddam Hussein banned but which re-emerged following his overthrow.

The Iraqi oil workers union has opposed privatization of public-sector industries and has helped force higher wages for oil workers. The union also helped dockworkers in Iraq in their struggle against foreign firms that had brought in foreign workers to do the work.

In the past, President Bush has promised more support for free labor unions in the Middle East. In Iraq, however, workers still technically don't have the right to form unions in the public sector, Al Asade said.

The Iraqi labor leaders also made it clear where they stand on the ongoing violence in Iraq.

"We believe American forces must withdraw immediately," Al Asade said outside the Port's Terminal 6. "We want to rebuild our country as Iraqis."

Activists and others struggled to hear Al Asade over the roar of trucks making their way in and out of the facility, and even an occasional jet taking off from Portland International Airport.

The two Iraqis blamed the U.S. government for the violence in Iraq. "Everything that is happening in Iraq is caused by the occupation," Al Asade said. But he was optimistic that things would improve if the United States pulled out. "Iraq will be rebuilt because Iraqis care about Iraq." Umara added he didn't think a civil war would result "because all Iraqis are brothers."

The Oregon AFL-CIO, along with more than 50 Portland area labor, religious and community organizations, sponsored the Portland visit. Besides the West Coast tour of the oil workers, four other Iraqi labor leaders are traveling to other parts of the country. Before going to Seattle, the two Iraqis talked Wednesday night at Portland State University.

During a meeting with Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams and Multnomah County Commissioner Serena Cruz, the Iraqis talked about the removal of Saddam from power. "It was a good thing, but it should not have been done this way," Al Asade said. "I think to destroy a country and to destroy the infrastructure of a country is not a nice thing."

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