



**report from iraq**

**working conditions and  
labor rights  
under the occupation**

**an eyewitness account of a labor delegation sent by us labor  
against the war to iraq in october, 2003**

# US Labor Against the War Sends a Delegation to Investigate Labor Rights in Iraq

Toward the end of 2001, as the drum beat for war from the Bush Administration grew louder and more ominous, a growing number of unions and other labor organizations declared their opposition to the administration's plan for war in Iraq.

In January, 2002, an emergency labor conference was convened in Chicago to organize and coordinate opposition in the labor movement to an Iraq war. That conference, attended by delegates from unions representing more than two million members, established U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW).

Among its earliest activities, USLAW circulated an antiwar appeal to labor movements around the world. That international declaration was signed by more than 200 labor federations and unions in 53 countries, collectively representing more than 130 million members.

In June, 2003, at an international conference in Geneva, USLAW's representative Amy Newell released a report containing dossiers on eighteen US corporations granted no-bid contracts in Iraq worth billions of dollars. This report profiled their record of labor, human rights, environmental, social and criminal misconduct - a veritable rogues gallery of socially irresponsible law-breakers.

The conference was called by the Paris-based International Liaison Committee (ILC) to coincide with the annual meeting of the International Labor Organization (ILO) of the United Nations, and included the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and other labor organizations from around the world.

The Geneva meeting resolved to send an international labor delegation to Iraq to investigate the conditions of workers and possible violations of their right to organize and bargain through unions of their own choosing.

Two representatives of USLAW, Clarence Thomas, Executive Board Member of the International Longshore & Warehouse Workers (ILWU) Local 10, and David Bacon, independent labor journalist and photographer, participated in the five-member delegation. Other members came from the ILC and a French teachers' union, and one was an Iraqi trade unionist and human rights advocate living in exile in France.

They spent six days in Iraq visiting workplaces, meeting with rank and file workers, union organizers, members of NGOs and even representatives of the Provisional Coalition Authority (CPA).

They discovered widespread, massive violations of workers' basic rights, 70% unemployment with no social safety net, human rights abuses, increasing control by U.S. corporations of the most basic elements of the Iraqi economy, and shockingly, CPA enforcement of a Saddam Hussein-era law that bars public sector workers and those employed by public enterprises from joining or being represented by unions. This report documents these conditions and the observations of the delegation.

In October, a National Labor Assembly for Peace was convened in Chicago by USLAW. Over 150 delegates debated a wide-ranging plan of work for challenging the militarization of US foreign and domestic policies, and

the establishment of a permanent war economy at the cost of US jobs and services. After hearing the delegation's report, the assembly decided to launch the Campaign to End the Occupation and for Labor Rights in Iraq.

At the close of this report there are campaign materials, including a petition and a sample resolution. USLAW asks all concerned trade unionists to get their organization to adopt a resolution supporting the campaign and to circulate the petition widely in unions, workplaces and communities.

Also provided are links to the USLAW website, where there is more information about USLAW, the campaign, and a wealth of information of interest to workers and members of the labor movement. This information helps to explain the reality of the occupation, the needless death and injury it causes to U.S. troops and the people of Iraq, and the way it violates internationally recognized labor and human rights. We invite you to visit the site and make use of its extensive resources.

There you will also find information about how to join and support USLAW and how your organization can affiliate with it.

JOIN US!

The photos in this report are by David Bacon. Thanks to the ILWU Dispatcher, The Progressive and the Vanguard Foundation.

# The Occupation's War on Iraqi Workers

by David Bacon

The disaster that is the occupation of Iraq is much more than the suicide bombings and guerilla ambushes of U.S. troops which play nightly across U.S. television screens. The violence of grinding poverty, exacerbated by economic sanctions after the first Gulf War, has been deepened by the the latest invasion. Every day the economic policies of the occupying authorities create more hunger among Iraq's working people, transforming them into a pool of low-wage, semi-employed labor, desperate for jobs at almost any price.

While the effects of U.S. policy on daily life go largely unseen in the U.S. media, anyone walking the streets of Baghdad cannot miss them. Children sleep on the sidewalks. Buildings that once housed many of the city's four million residents, or the infrastructure that makes life in a modern city possible, like the telephone exchange, remain burned-out ruins months after the occupation started. Rubble fills the broad boulevards which were once the pride of a wealthy country, and

the air has become gritty and brown as thousands of vehicles kick the resulting dust into the air.

In the meantime U.S. contractors get rich from the billions of taxpayer dollars supposedly appropriated for reconstruction. Iraq's national wealth — factories, refineries, mines, docks, and other industrial facilities — are being readied for sale to foreign companies by the occupation's bureaucracy, to whom democracy and the unrestrained free market are the same thing.

But Iraqi workers, while

- desperately. For months they've been paid at an emergency level dictated by the US occupation authority, known as the Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA. Most workers get \$60/month, a small percentage \$120, and a tiny minority (mostly administrators and managers) \$180. This is the same wage scale that prevailed under the last few years of the Saddam Hussein regime.

One worker at the General State Leather Industry Factory, the largest shoe factory in the Middle



*Workers at the State Leather Industry factory talk about the problems they have living on the CPA-mandated emergency payment.*

facing bleak conditions, are not accepting their fate, at least as defined by corporate planners. They are organizing and making plans of their own.

Iraqi workers need a raise

East, says she supports six people in her family with the emergency payment. "The prices of food and clothing are going up rapidly, and the salary is very low. We work hard, and I've been here 10 years. I

have to have a raise," she pleads.

Another worker at the Al Daura oil refinery just outside Baghdad, said "I still have no house or place to live, and the current emergency wage is totally incapable of supporting us." In September and October, the refinery saw three work stoppages, in which workers demanded a regular salary, at a level higher than the emergency payments. Leather factory workers even marched to the Labor Ministry, complaining about their manager and the wages. Similar protests have been happening at workplaces throughout the country.

Those without jobs, estimated at about 70 percent of the workforce, or about 7-8 million people, have even less. Twenty years ago, most people living in Baghdad were supported by regular employment. Today the informal, or black economy, is the means of survival for an enormous part of the population. The \$87 billion just appropriated by Congress for Iraqi "reconstruction" contains not a dime for workers or the unemployed. Instead, the money will prepare the way for the transformation of the Iraqi economy, and the privatization of the state enterprises at its heart. In the process the Bush administration is not considering measures to protect labor rights. Instead, since April the CPA has banned unions in Iraqi state enterprises.

Thomas Foley, director for private sector development for the CPA, announced a list of the first state enterprises to be sold off, including cement and fertilizer plants, phosphate and sulfur mines, pharmaceutical factories and the country's airline. Foley described his goal as a "fully thriving capitalist economy." On September 19 the CPA published Order No. 39, which permits 100% foreign ownership of businesses, except for the oil industry, and allows repatriation of profits. No. 37 suspends income and property taxes for the year, and limits taxes on individuals and

corporations in the future to 15%.

Dathar Al-Kashab, manager of the Al Daura refinery, predicted that privatization would have an enormous effect. "A worker starting here today has a job for life, under the old system, and there's no law which permits me to lay him off. But if I put on the hat of privatization, I'll have to fire 1500 [of the refinery's 3000] workers. In America when a company lays people off, there's unemployment insurance, and they won't die from hunger. If I dismiss employees now, I'm killing them and their families." Al

workers?"

## **WORKERS ORGANIZE DESPITE THE BAN**

Despite fear of privatization the fall of the Saddam regime has led to an explosion of workplace organizing activity. Low wages are one motivation, but often working conditions are even more important. At the Al Daura refinery, Detrala Beshab, president of the refinery's new union, noted that while the workday is officially seven hours, the day shift is actually



*Workers at the power plant of the Al Daura refinery talk about the difficult working conditions they endure, and their effort to win legal status for their union.*

Kashab was formerly the manager of the maintenance department, and still wears his machinist's overalls as he sits behind the huge desk of the plant director, a position to which he was appointed when the occupation began.

The state-owned Mamoun Factory of Vegetable Oils, which employs 771 workers is another prime candidate for sale to a private owner. "But there's no private person in Iraq with enough money to buy this place," said manager Amir Faraj Bhajet. "It would have to be a foreign owner. They would like the assets, but would they want the

11 hours long, and the night shift 13 hours. Since workers are paid by the month, there is no overtime pay.

"When we talked to the manager, he told us he had to talk to the Oil Ministry, which had to talk to the Finance Ministry, which had to get permission from the coalition forces," Beshab said. "The coalition forces control the finances and our wages." Beshab and the union committee are all older men, at least in their forties. The plant hasn't hired new workers in some time. Any job in Baghdad right now may be precarious, but it is a means of survival, so workers hang

onto them by any means they can. An eleven hour shift is much better than no shift at all.

The workers' situation is so desperate the refinery gives them motor oil every month to make up for their low income. On the highway outside the plant, the sons of refinery workers have set up little roadside stands selling it to passing cars.

The refinery and every other state enterprise used to pay important benefits. There was a system of bonuses and profit-sharing, often was as much as the salary

or sick, they have to pay for their own medical care, and lose pay for the time they're out of work.

Two months ago, organizers came out to the plant from one of Iraq's two new labor federations, the Workers Democratic Trade Union Federation, the modern successor to the country's pre-Saddam labor movement. Iraq has a long history of labor and radical activity, born during the fight against the British during their 6-year occupation of the country at the end of World War One. Starting with oil, railroad and dock workers,

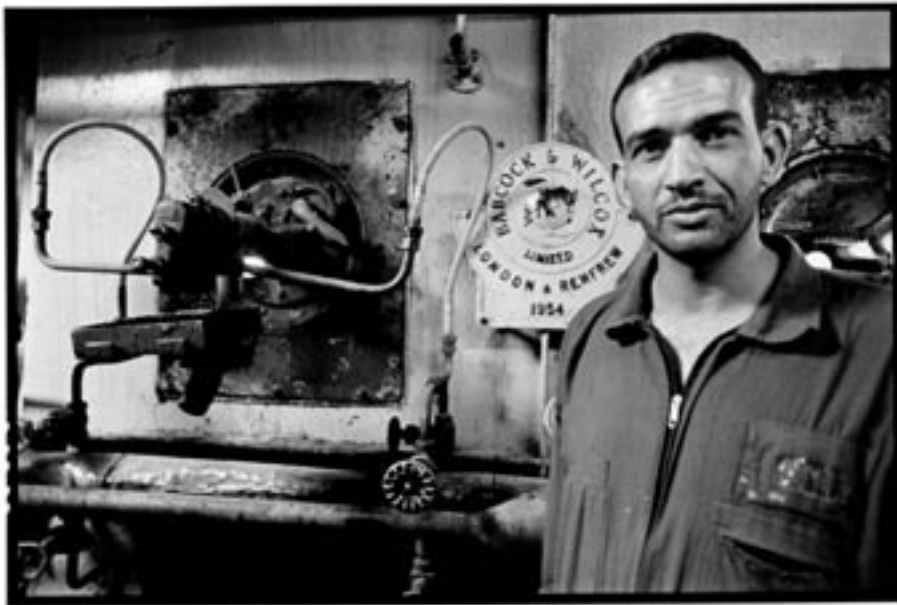
Following the fall of the Saddam regime in April, organizers of the old unions resurfaced. In Basra, they mounted a strike two days after the arrival of British troops, demanding the right to organize and protesting the appointment of a Baath Party member as the new mayor. Subsequently, 400 union activists met in Baghdad in June, forming the Workers Democratic Trade Union Federation, and laid plans to reorganize unions in twelve of the country's main industries.

After that meeting, organizers fanned out to workplaces, including the Al Daura refinery. There they encouraged workers in each of the nine departments to elect union committees, and to choose leaders for the entire installation. While the plant manager seemed very willing to talk with the union, he was not able to sign any kind of contract with the federation.

The refinery and all other state enterprises are still covered by the law issued by Saddam on March 11, 1987 that abolished Labour Law No. 151 of 1970, which guaranteed such rights as the 8 hour day. Saddam's 1987 decree turned workers in the public sector into "civil servants," thereby denying them the right to form or join unions or to bargain. The pension funds of these workers were handed to the treasury without compensation. At the same time that unions in the public sector were banned, new "unions" were created for the private sector which, according to Law 52 of 1987, would work with management to "increase efficiency and work discipline."

The 1987 law has a special effect on workers employed in enterprises set to be privatized-if they have no legal union, no right to bargain and no contracts, the privatization of the plants and the huge job losses that will come with it will face much less organized resistance.

On June 5 CPA head Paul Bremer issued a decree, called "Public Incitement to Violence and



*The furnace tender at the power plant of the Al Daura refinery .*

itself, and a food subsidy as well. All those benefits disappeared when the occupation authorities took over. Workers have suffered a drastic cut in income since April as a result of CPA decisions. A skyrocketing exchange rate (2000 dinars to the dollar in mid-October) has made imports more expensive — in effect, another cut in salary.

No one in the refinery, except the fire department, has boots or gloves. Safety glasses are unknown. "Lots of us have breathing problems, and there are accidents in which people get burned," explained another union member, Rajid Hassan. If anyone gets hurt

unions mounted strikes, which the British suppressed at gunpoint, killing strikers.

The monarchy the British installed, lasting until 1958, continued to make union organizing illegal. After the 1958 revolution overthrew the king, unions and radical political parties came above-ground for the first time. But in 1963, the CIA mounted a coup against the Kassem government, and installed the Baath Party. In 1977, Saddam Hussein, who became the Baath Party ruler, purged the unions and made radical parties illegal. Many activists were executed, and others fled Iraq into exile.

Disorder." In a paragraph about "prohibited pronouncements," section b) list those that "incite civil disorder, rioting or damage to property." Those who violate the decree "will be subject to immediate detention by CPA security forces and held as a security internee under the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 [which governs prisoners of war]." The phrase civil disorder can easily be interpreted as applying to people advocating or organizing strikes.

In an October 13 interview, Dr. Nuri Jafer, assistant to the Iraqi Minister of Labor, was asked whether the 1987 law would be repealed, and refused to answer the question. Sitting next to him, Leslie Findley, a British advisor assigned by the CPA to oversee the ministry, was asked the same question, and also refused to answer. Then she complained about the number of union delegations visiting the ministry, making the same request. "I'm going to tell the minister that these are taking too much of his time, and recommend that he concentrate instead on doing his job," she warned.

Dr. Jafer spent a half-hour describing in glowing terms his idea for a new system of unemployment benefits, paying, he hoped, a survival income "without removing the motivation from people to go out and find jobs." Dr. Nuri's explanation had one major problem. "As yet, unfortunately," he conceded, "we have yet to find any country willing to help us fund it."

## **UNEMPLOYED ALSO ORGANIZE**

At the shoe and vegetable oil factories, another new labor group began organizing workers this summer, called the Workers Unions and Councils. With its encouragement, shoe factory workers organized a union and demanded legal recognition. Like workers at

the refinery, they complained about long hours without overtime pay, no vacations, and the disappearance of their extra pay when the occupation started.

"We're demanding the right to form a union which must have full authority to represent workers here," explained one worker. "We must change this law that says we don't have to right to a union." "Life has gotten much worse," said another. "Everything is controlled by the coalition. We don't control anything."

Even without legal status, unions are finding a way to operate and win some demands. The vegetable oil factory's employees tried first to set up a union for the food products industry. The labor ministry then reminded them that they were civil servants, and therefore prohibited from collective bargaining. The workers and the Workers Councils responded by setting up a union for civil servants, defying the ban.

Part of the Workers Councils network is the Union of the Unemployed, which for months marched and demonstrated in the streets for survival payments for people who often are starving. On July 29 they set up a tent encampment in front of the compound of the US occupation authorities, and the soldiers detained 21 of the union's leaders as a result. "The money they spent on just ten combat helicopters would be enough to meet the needs of all the unemployed workers in our country," charged Qasim Hadi, the union's general secretary, who has been arrested twice in protests.

In the face of extreme levels of unemployment, the occupation authorities have claimed that the contracts for reconstruction given to US corporations will result in jobs for large numbers of Iraqis. In an August 13 letter to the Union of the Unemployed, William B. Clatanoff, the then-CPA advisor to the Ministry of Labor, boasted that

neighborhood councils throughout Baghdad would nominate projects "which will not only offer productive jobs, but also quickly impact neighborhoods in need of overdue improvements." Anyone driving through the city's streets in the following two months could easily see the absence of any such public works, however. Enormous piles of rubble from the war remain untouched. Clatanoff promised 300,000 jobs throughout Iraq, none of which have appeared.

Nevertheless, US corporations are actively providing some essential services to the occupation troops, maintaining prison compounds, and rebuilding those parts of the infrastructure, like ports and pipelines, needed to get oil exports restarted. But here the employment of Iraqi nationals is much less desired.

Highly paid technicians are brought in from outside, and housed in compounds surrounded by walls and razor wire, escorted by soldiers. According to the Financial Times of London, contractors preparing meals for troops on their bases use foreign nationals because they don't trust Iraqis. "Iraqis are a security threat," said a manager for the Tamimi Company, which provides food service for 60,000 soldiers. Instead, the firm brought in 1800 workers from Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Tamimi in turn is a contractor to US construction giant Kellogg, Brown and Root, a subsidiary of the Halliburton Corporation. Halliburton's no-bid contract in Iraq is worth over \$2 billion.

Those Iraqis who do get hired to work for the Americans on the bases describe oppressive working conditions. Muiwafa al Saidy, who works for US contractors doing construction at the Baghdad airport, complained that "soldiers aim guns at us wherever we go, even to the toilet." Workers are paid \$5 a day, but have to give \$2 of that to a "translator" who threatens to tell

the soldiers they're terrorists unless he gets paid off. They have to pass through three different gates to gain access to the area where they work, and al Saïdy described instances in which they were held in a no-man's land between the gates all day, to punish them for arriving a few minutes late.

Adding to the tension are the presence of prisoners in the compound. Al Saïdy said he's seen children brought in from the soccer fields, balls in hand, old men in their 80s, and even hospital patients carrying their drip bags. He described treatment bordering on contempt - food thrown on the ground, blows with sticks, and other forms of disrespect.

## **IRAQI WORKERS GET INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT**

In August, a representative of the International Labor Organization, Walid Hamdan, visited Iraq. On his return, he made a report to the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICTU). Guy Ryder, the ICTU's general secretary, called for an international labor delegation to visit Iraq to investigate conditions for workers. "Ensuring respect for workers' rights, including freedom of association, must be central to building a democratic Iraq and to ensuring sustainable economic and social development," the ICTU said in a May 30 statement. "Democracy must have roots. It requires free elections, but also mass based, democratic trade unions that help secure it and protect it as well as being schools of democracy."

Arab trade unionists are also critical of the occupation's effect on workers.

According to Hacene Djemam, General Secretary of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, "war makes privatization easy: first you destroy the society and then you let the corporations rebuild it." He emphasized

that Iraqi workers must be able to form unions of their own choosing.

Meanwhile, US Labor Against the War, which brought together unions and labor councils that opposed the Bush intervention before it took place, prepared a research paper after the occupation started, profiling the US corporations that were given reconstruction contracts. The USLAW delegation to Iraq in October took copies of the report, and offered to assist unions there if and when they confront the kind of union-busting activity for which some of those companies have become notorious. A British labor delegation also visited Iraq in September.

Labor support in the US for Iraqi unions will focus on the repeal of the 1987 Saddam law prohibiting collective bargaining for state-sector workers, and the removal of other legal barriers on labor activity. The US Labor Assembly for Peace, convened in Chicago on October 24 and 25 by USLAW, announced a national campaign to defend Iraqi labor rights under the occupation, and resolved to make this an issue in the 2004 election. It called for Congressional hearings into the enforcement of the 1987 law, and began circulating resolutions through unions around the country to build up pressure on Bush and the CPA.

Clarence Thomas, former secretary-treasurer of San Francisco longshore Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, was a member of the USLAW October delegation. He explained to a meeting of WDTUF leaders that his local had opposed the war even before it started, a position backed up by the International union at its convention in June. Jassim Mashkoul, the new federation's director for internal communications, thanked him for his opposition to the war and occupation. "At the beginning, we thought our situation might be better afterwards, since we got rid of Saddam Hussein. But it hasn't

been." He cited the occupation authority's enforcement of the 1987 law as a major obstacle. In addition, he noted, the new federation has asked that the old union structure set up by Saddam Hussein be officially dissolved, and its buildings and the benefit funds it administered turned over to the new unions. The occupation authorities have turned a deaf ear to these appeals as well.

Both the WDTUF and the Workers Councils federations opposed the war and call for an end to the occupation. But according to another leader of the federation, Muhsen Mull Ali, who spent two long stints in prison for organizing unions in Basra, "they will reimpose capitalism on us, so our responsibility is to oppose privatization as much as possible, and fight for the welfare of our workers."

"If unions here knew what's being done in our name over there, they'd be outraged," Thomas declared.



# "I'm going back to Basra"

By David Bacon

Muhsin Mull Ali no longer loads and unloads ships on the docks of Basra, the large port city in the south of Iraq. But while his worklife as a longshoreman is over, he's not retiring anytime soon from a political life dedicated to winning for his country's workers a voice in their own destiny. Today Iraq is occupied by a quarter million foreign troops. Bombs explode daily in Baghdad. But in the midst of occupation and insurrection, Mull Ali sees the organization of workers as the key to ensuring that Iraq has a democratic future.

Muhsin spent half a century on the piers and in the harbor, building unions for dockworkers. And for his efforts, he went to prison twice, lived in exile, and spent years underground. Muhsin Mull Ali is a hero in the history of the Iraqi labor movement.

Iraqi unions have a long history, full of drama, sacrifice, and even bloody confrontation. They first organized against the British, when they took Iraq from the Turkish sultans at the end of World War One. It was the British who developed the oil wells during the 20s and 30s, and immediately faced the resistance of the country's oil workers. In the 1930s, Iraqi workers first organized the oil industry, then the railroads, and then the docks.

Those unions had to operate underground. While the British only ruled Iraq directly for six years, they then installed a king. The country was a monarchy for 3 decades, in which unions were illegal, and the British got all the oil they needed.

That was the period in which Muhsin became an activist. "I began working as a docker in Basra in 1949," he says. "We couldn't organize legally then, so

we set up an underground network of trade unions." He was eventually discovered and fired in 1951, but the dockers' organization was solid enough that they struck in 1952. The army was called in, and shot workers, killing three and wounding 27. Nevertheless, they won their demands. Muhsin himself was reinstated, only to be fired again six days later.

He went to another port the following year, still underground, and organized another strike. This one also succeeded, but he had to flee the country to neighboring Kuwait. He lived there for four years, but the Kuwaiti authorities finally handed him over to the Iraqi government, which sent him to prison.

Muhsin was freed by the revolution of 1958, when Iraqis finally threw out the king. And no sooner was he out of jail than he went back to Basra, to organize unions again.

Where the king had ensured that British companies operated freely, putting down unions and strikes on their behalf, the revolution changed all that. Foreign interests were confiscated, organizing workers became legal, and the Iraqi labor federations were able to operate aboveground for the first time in their history. But nationalism came at a high price. Just five years after getting rid of the king, the CIA helped overthrow the government of Karim Kassem. Muhsin was arrested again. This time he spent two and a half years behind bars. Eventually he was released, and again he returned to Basra.

During the five years before the CIA coup, work was begun on a new port — Umm Qasr. Its construction was a symbol of progress and independence, an achievement of the Iraqi revolution. Eventually a thousand longshore workers were employed by the port. But the

lives of Umm Qasr's workers didn't improve immediately. Instead, subcontracting companies were allowed to hire workers on a daily basis as dockers. Finally, longshoremen rebelled. Their union demanded a hiring system under their control, and a daily guaranteed wage, even if there was no boat to load or unload.

The 1963 CIA coup installed the Baath Party in power. Saddam Hussein took control of the party and government in 1969, and in 1977 purged unions of his political opponents and drove radical political parties underground or into exile. Leaders of the unions organized after 1958 were fired, driven into exile, and even executed.

He then declared war on Iran in 1980, fearing the Islamic Revolution which threw out the US-supported Shah. Under Saddam, Iraq became a client state of the US, which gave him arms and money to fight that war, in which over 400,000 Iraqis died. During the fighting against Iran, Umm Qasr proved to have an important strategic value. Loading and unloading ships at the docks in Basra, on the Chatt-al-Arab waterway, just a few miles from Iran's border, was practically impossible. Umm Qasr became Iraq's most important port.

In 1987, Saddam had another unpleasant surprise for Iraqi workers. He issued a law declaring that the class struggle was over. Longshore workers, like all other workers in state-owned enterprises, were declared to be civil servants. As such, Saddam said, they had no right to organize unions or to bargain. And without real unions, conditions deteriorated again. Bad conditions and low wages were then made worse after 1991, by the US economic sanctions imposed after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf War.

Today Umm Qasr, under the US military occupation of Iraq, has become war booty. It was the first Iraqi enterprise to be turned over, not just to a private owner, but to a foreign one. Even before US troops had reached Baghdad, in Washington DC the Bush administration gave the concession for operating the port to Stevedoring Services of America, a politically-connected firm handling cargo around the world. In 2002, during the negotiations of the labor agreement between the Pacific Maritime Association and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, SSA was widely viewed, especially by the union, as the Association's most anti-union employer.

Privatizing Umm Qasr began the transformation of the Iraqi economy — from one based on nationalization and production for domestic welfare to one based on ownership by transnational corporations, sending their profits out of the country. To Iraqis, instead of a symbol of national pride, Umm Qasr represents the new era of foreign domination.

The free trade ideologues of the Bush administration see the occupation of Iraq as a beach-head into the Middle East and south Asia. Their first objective is the transformation of the state-dominated economy of what was once one of the region's wealthiest, and most industrialized countries. Tom Foley, a Bush fundraiser put in charge of implementing this vision on the ground, made his goal as

a "fully thriving capitalist economy." A free-market Iraq, he and his cohorts hope, will then set new ground rules for the rest of the area, much as the North American Free Trade Agreement first helped to transform Mexico's economy, and then became a prototype for the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Life in Umm Qasr has changed completely for the people on the piers. A decade-long war with Iran, then the first Gulf War followed by twelve years of sanctions, and finally a new invasion and occupation have all taken their toll. Much of the port lies in a shambles, although the basic infrastructure is still in place. Despite its dilapidated state, Umm Qasr is still a highly developed facility, with

living depends on the jobs the port provides hangs in the balance. Iraqi workers look at the prospect of privatization with dread, knowing that private operators will cut jobs drastically to boost profits.

Today that 1987 law banning unions in state enterprises is still being enforced by the US occupation authority. On the Umm Qasr docks, therefore, unions are still effectively banned. What SSA couldn't get in its negotiations with the ILWU in the US, it got as a gift from the occupation authorities at its operation in Iraq.

Clarence Thomas, former secretary-treasurer of ILWU Local 10, interviewed Muhsin in order to bring back to US longshore workers a better idea of the situation faced



*Mussin MullAli*

23 berths for ships, four modern container cranes, and a grain and cement dock. (Oil exports are handled through another port.)

For workers, the biggest change is still in the making. A foreign corporation has taken over the operation of what once was a crown jewel of the Iraqi economy. As a result, the status of the people whose

by dock unions in Iraq. While the Workers Democratic Trade Union Federation has set up an organization for dockers and other transport workers, there is still no union on the docks in Umm Qasr, Muhsin said. But the federation is planning to help workers there organize.

"I'm going back to Basra," he promised, "to help organize unions again."

# Labor in Iraq Starts to Move

By Ewa Jasiewicz and the Occupation Watch Centre in Iraq, and David Bacon. Current reports are posted as they are received to the U.S. Labor Against the War ([www.uslabagainstawar.org](http://www.uslabagainstawar.org)) and Occupation Watch ([www.occupationwatch.org](http://www.occupationwatch.org)) websites.

## **BASRA – A HOTBED OF LABOR ACTIVITY**

In Basra there have been three general strikes over wages. The CPA has changed payment from dinars to dollars, so earnings fluctuate with the fluctuating exchange rate. August and September were “hot months” of strikes, including a regional walkout demanding gas, water and electricity. Action started when transportation workers marched through the streets, joined by thousands of others. One strike also included demands for the lowering of the price of cooking gas, which had skyrocketed from 1,500 dinars to 12,000 dinars (\$6 or four days work at minimum wage).

In September 150 workers participated in an autonomous strike in the She’eva refinery, over low wages and the abolition of all supplementary benefits. Also in late September, workers struck in Maqal port because they were being paid in rapidly inflating Iraqi dinars rather than dollars. Dockers had gone from receiving \$60-\$120 wages (in dollars) to 60,000 to 120,000 dinars, in 10,000 Dinar notes. A riot ensued, involving hundreds of workers. Following the trashing of the port’s offices and the accounting department, the company accountant was dismissed. The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)

accused the accountant of creating disturbances in order to undermine security in Basra. In the end, workers received their full pay in dollars.

In early October, 2003, a two-day wildcat strike took place at the Bergeseeya Oil Refinery, part of the Southern Oil Company, Iraq’s largest crude oil pumping and refining company. The strike occurred because the Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR)-subcontracted and Kuwaiti-based Al Khoorafi construction company had employed foreign workers (Indian and Pakistani) in place of the existing, experienced Iraqi workforce. Foreign workers were 60-70% of the workforce. Iraqi workers physically threw out the foreign workers and protested noisily outside the company’s offices. Tribal leaders representing the workers eventually resolved the dispute. The boss immediately reversed the ratio of foreign to indigenous workers. In late October, a woman working in the accounts department of the Iraqi Port Authority led a total workforce walkout over wages paid 7-14 days late. The following day, the workers received their pay.

## **ELECTRICAL WORKERS FIGHT LOW WAGES**

Haartha Power Station, Basra’s largest, built in 1978, is currently running at 25% capacity. The urgently needed reconstruction is incomplete because the station’s makers, Mitsubishi, refuse to enter Iraq out of security concerns. Only Mitsubishi owns all the drawings, plans, and the spare parts for the plant and the chances for providing Basra with sufficient electricity in the near future appear slim. In

December, extensive reconstruction work was carried out on a power line that exploded. Workers carried out the reconstruction work using spare parts from the local market. The local papers declared that Bechtel had carried out the work. In fact, workers say that Bechtel was involved in anything. Bechtel representatives visited to ask about worker needs but have produced nothing.

None of the Iraqi workers receive any special payments for overtime, emergency work, location, or high-risk work (which would normally be 30% higher). Family pay supplements have also been cancelled. Abdul Razzaq Majeed, the Plant’s Director General, said that due to looting, safety equipment is only available for 50% of the workforce. Dangerous chemicals handled at the plant include liquid ammonia, hydrochloric acid and liquid hydrazine. Workers in the plant’s operations room were very disgruntled with their conditions. Health risks ranged from long hours to boiler room overheating. Mud is being caked around the boiler turbine in order to cool it down. All the workers complain about low wages and long hours, including 15-hour shifts without any official breaks. Workers report there is no ventilation, no safety equipment, no automatic system against overheating and sections of the plant are incredibly noisy. The entire boiler room staff of 25 shares one breathing mask, and that mask expired in the 1980s. In the eighties this wasn’t so important but now conditions are much worse. Overalls are two years old and there are no safety boots. If there is any error in the tower section, workers must climb six floors to check it out; there are no telecommunications or elevators.

Strike action took place at this plant in November because of the non-payment of wages. The Director allegedly accused workers of not working hard enough and not showing up on time and withheld

wages as punishment. Following the strike, the company paid the overdue wages.

At the Najibeeya electrical plant, the General Director, Hamad Salem Raaghdbaan is abiding by the CPA's June Public Notice and refuses to recognize the union. The company pays female administrative employees 10,000-20,000 dinars less per month than their male counterparts doing the same job. The plant's former childcare space was turned into housing for high-ranking employees directly after the war, leaving women with no safe place for their children during the day. Women can be seen walking around the plant either carrying their small children or with the children trotting beside them. The company promised women workers a new nursery space but the space never materialized.

Mechanical operations workers were receiving only 2,000 dinars a day and elderly workers are receiving just 1,000. Workers said they were highly experienced but were not receiving any reconstruction work, which is being performed by foreign workers. Bechtel initially inventoried what was needed, including safety equipment, but workers said the company has not provided any new equipment or materials. Unionists said people were conscious that Bechtel was awarded multi-million dollar contracts, while ordinary workers got next to nothing

## **SOUTHERN OIL COMPANY**

At the North Rumeilla crude oil pumping station, workers demanded that the administration be changed totally and that they receive company housing (occupied mostly by engineers and former Ba'athists), better wages, safety equipment, a functioning plant hospital, decent transportation to and from workplaces, and the same benefits as their counterpart oil workers in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. They feared their rations would

be cut and demanded that the level be kept as it is if not raised higher. If privatization occurs, the workers say they will shut down Iraq from North to South, and that it will occur "over their dead bodies."

At the Bergeseeya Crude Oil Export Station, a strike took place in September over low, late wages that were paid in dinars, not dollars, as well as 24-hour shifts, no overtime, and no bonuses or benefits. According to some participants, workers also wanted to send a message to Washington that Iraq is theirs. A 6-hour strike costs the CPA approximately \$4.5 million. At the She'iba Refinery of the Basra Oil Company, a strike took place in September over low and late wages paid in dinars. When workers were told KBR was involved in running their refinery, and that the company had also built the cages for internees at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay, one worker responded, "Well, that makes sense as this place is like one big prison."

Autonomous reconstruction work took place in June in the water injection section using materials bought from the market and workers' own tools. Workers also built their own rest accommodation. We were told that plant workers had completed about 40 percent of the reconstruction at North Rumeilla. KBR had been to visit and took an inventory but did not supply any materials. The Southern Oil Company Union, headed by Hassan Ju'ma, banned all foreign workers from its facilities following the Bergeseeya Plant action against foreign laborers in October. KBR tried to get indigenous workers to accept its foreign staff at all its locations but the local workers refused to budge. Bargaining attempts to accept 50 percent of KBR's foreign staff were rejected, as were concessions of 5 percent, 2 percent and even 1 percent. "Iraq will be reconstructed by Iraqis, we don't need any foreign interference," union leader Jum'a said. KBR has provided materials in the last two months. In the meantime

plant workers work independently and are paid the average CPA wage. "Drivers are the only foreigners we allow anywhere," Ju'ma said.

## **IRAQI UNIONS WIN THEIR FIRST MAJOR VICTORY**

In December, oil workers throughout Basra announced the formation of their own wage table, challenging the CPA's Order 30 on Reform of Salaries and Employment Conditions of State Employees, issued in September. That order set a 130 position, 10 step and 13 level wage table, and eliminated all previous house, food, family, risk and location subsidies. It set the minimum wage for an Iraqi public sector worker at 69,000 Iraqi dinars (\$40), a drop from the minimum wage under the emergency salary scheme of \$60.

Southern Oil Company workers surveyed prices and proposed their own wage table, setting the minimum salary at approximately 155,000 ID per month (\$85) - cutting out at the three bottom-wage levels. They backed up the proposal with a the threat to strike and shut off oil production. Workers also threatened to join the armed resistance if occupation troops were called in to take over the pumps. SOC's wage table and its 'take it or fight us' conditions prompted the Minister of Oil to come to Basra. He agreed immediately to return to the emergency CPA salary table -- the old \$60/120/180 monthly scale.

Then, in January, electricity unions at the Najibeeya, Haartha and Az Zubeir generating stations mounted a wildcat strike, stormed their workplace administration buildings, declared the CPA wage table void, and vowed to shut off power if wages were not raised. The Minister of Energy also agreed to return to the old emergency wagescale.

Samir Hanoon, vice president of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions in Basra explained

that, "we hope that this strike can be conducted safely and legally. But if we cannot win through the legal procedures, we will take other actions -- protests, demonstrations and total shut-downs. We realize that there may be some sacrifices but we are ready to accept them. Our real problem is with the CPA, with Bremer."

Finally, in mid-January, Southern Oil Company unionists won the first battle when the CPA agreed to implement the union's wage table in the oil industry. By February, the SOC wage table was being implemented only in the oil sector (the biggest public sector employer in Iraq), while other public sector industries, especially electricity, were still in negotiations. Many workers believed, however, they would be put on the same wage table, since a strike in the power sector would halt all other industries.

## **PORTWORKERS IN UMM QASR AND MAQ'AL**

Wages were changed from the dollarized emergency scale to 100,000, 200,000 and 300,000 dinar in October, with most workers receiving 100,000; or 200,000 with 15 years of service. Occupation wages were lower in real terms due to the elimination of profit sharing. All Iraqi Port Authority workers had been paid 2% of the profits accrued from unloading fees. The loading fee per container was \$150 with two ships docking per week, unloading approximately 250 containers each.

Umm Qasr workers need transportation to work as the road to Umm Qasr is dangerous - in mid-January a looter killed a port employee on his way home from work. Out of the six buses the port had prior to the war, only one remains functional. Corrupt managers stole the others.

On October 25, Port Director Abdel Razzaq issued a notice banning any employee working for the Port Authority from speaking

to any press or NGO without his permission. Workers attempted to form a union but on election day, the manager removed the banner announcing the voting. Workers were told they had to wait until a new law was passed. The head of the Basra Federation of Trade Unions says that Razzaq fired three port workers for trying to form a union in November.

John Walsh, Operations Manager at Umm Qasr for Stevedoring Services of America said there had been no strikes by dockers, but stoppages had taken place on container ships after workers demanded subsidies and bonuses. He admitted that he felt that the Port Authority was not capable of running the port autonomously and needed help to adjust to the international market. In May, USAID will either extend SSA's contract to operate the port, or the Port Authority may lease Umm Qasr to SSA.

In mid-January workers organized a six-hour strike over the low wage scale, closing and blocking the main gate into Umm Qasr and refusing entry to any vehicles or people. Managers had delayed wages, and then paid them in old 10,000 dinar notes, that could only be exchanged for 7,500 dinars on the market. After workers trashed the account department and Razzaq's offices, before being confronted by occupation troops, he bought the protection of a 125-man strong Badr Brigades Militia (armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution).

## **THE WORKERS' COUNCILS AND UNIONS IN IRAQ**

After 7 Months of preparation and organizing, the first conference of Workers' Unions and Councils in Iraq took place in Baghdad in December, 2003. The participants at the conference articulated a list of workers immediate demands and wrote a draft of a new Iraqi Labour Code and the main outlines for a

labour legislation. The participating delegations at the conference elected the members of the leadership committee. At the end, the participants formally established the Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq - WCUI, one of two federations organized since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

WUCI representatives said their conference demonstrated that the workers of Iraq do not recognize any religious, racial, tribal, or ethnic division. The workers showed that they can unite despite the current political wrangling in Iraq and attempts to divide Iraq along ethnic, religious, and nationalistic lines.

## **UNION LEADERS ARRESTED**

US occupation forces in Iraq escalated their efforts to paralyze Iraq's new labor unions with a series of arrests this weekend. On Saturday, a convoy of ten humvees and personnel carriers descended on the old headquarters building of the Transport and Communications Workers union, in Baghdad's central bus station, which has been used since June as the office of the Iraqi Workers Federation of Trade Unions. Twenty soldiers jumped out, stormed into the building, put handcuffs on eight members of the Federation's executive board, and took them into detention.

"They gave no reason at all, despite being asked over and over," says federation spokesperson Abdullah Muhsin. Soldiers painted out the name of the federation on the front of the building with black paint. Because the new Iraqi unions lack basic resources like office furniture and machines, there was little to confiscate in the building. "But we did have a few files, and they took those," Muhsin adds. Ironically, the office had posters on the walls condemning terrorism, which soldiers tore down in the raid.

Although the eight were released the following day, there was no explanation from the Coali-

tion Provisional Authority for the detentions. The union was also denied the use of the building and its offices.

The bus station raid followed the detention of two other trade union leaders on November 23 -- Qasim Hadi, general secretary of the Union of the Unemployed, and Adil Salih, another leader of the organization. Hadi has been arrested twice before by occupation troops, for leading demonstrations of unemployed workers demanding unemployment benefits and jobs. In the latest raid, CPA troops said they'd found two guns in the union's office, which was only permitted to have one. Hadi explained that the organization has been the subject of threats and fatwas by Iraqi religious parties, and needs weapons for self-defense, since US troops are unable or unwilling to provide security. The two were released after being detained for a day.

In February, the IFTU announced that the Iraqi Governing Council had granted it legal recognition and status. In worksites, however, the 1987 ban on unions in the public sector continued to be enforced by the occupation authorities.

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<http://www.occupationwatch.org/article.php?id=2180> - SOC Workers Throw Out KBR, Reconstruct Their workplaces Autonomously - article by Ewa Jasiewicz  
<http://www.labournet.net/world/0312/Iraq3.html> - Iraqi Workers Threaten General Strike, Armed resistance - article by Ewa Jasiewicz  
<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/01/283668.html> - Basra Braces Itself for Industrial Shut-Down - article by Ewa Jasiewicz  
[http://www.kclabor.org/occupied\\_basra\\_electricity\\_worke.htm](http://www.kclabor.org/occupied_basra_electricity_worke.htm) - Update on Electricity Workers' Strike article by Ewa Jasiewicz.

# ILO Conventions and Resources

## CONVENTION 98 (1949)

Requires protection against discrimination by employers on the basis of union membership or activity, and bans interference in the internal affairs of or actions of unions or efforts by employers to establish company-dominated unions.

## CONVENTION 87 (1948)

Protects freedom of association and the right to organize into unions of workers' own choosing and bars public authorities from interfering with the exercise of these rights or administratively suspending or dissolving workers' unions or labor federations

## CONVENTION 100 (1951)

"Equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value refers to rates of remuneration established without discrimination based on sex."

## CONVENTION 118 (1962)

Equality of Treatment (Social Security Convention) protects benefits, including medical care, survivors' benefit, sickness, employment injury, maternity, unemployment, invalidity, family benefit, and old-age benefit. Prior to the invasion and occupation, Iraq had provisions for all of these except for unemployment benefits.

## CONVENTION 135 (1971)

"Workers' representatives in the undertaking shall enjoy effective protection against any act prejudicial to them, including dismissal, based on their status or activities as a workers' representative or on union membership or participation in union activities, in so far as they

act in conformity with existing laws or collective agreements or other jointly agreed arrangements."

## CONVENTION 138 (1973)

Bans labor by children younger than 14 (age 18 for hazardous work) and calls upon states to progressively increase the minimum age for employment.

## RESOURCES

<http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org> - homepage of USLAW  
<http://www.progressive.org/dec03/bac1203.html> - Saddam's Labor Laws Live On, by David Bacon, Progressive Magazine  
<http://www.corpwatch.org/issues/PID.jsp?articleid=9408> - Umm Qasr -- From National Pride to War Booty, by David Bacon  
<http://www.labournet.de/internationales/iq/arrest.html> - US Arrests Iraqi Union Leaders, by David Bacon  
<http://www.occupationwatch.org> - homepage of Occupation Watch  
<http://www.cpa-iraq.org/regulations/index.html#Orders> - page detailing all CPA Regulations, Orders, Public Notices and Memoranda  
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/arpro/beirut/rights/rights11con.htm> - table of all International Labour Organisation conventions ratified by middle eastern countries.  
<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm> - database of all 185 International Labour Organisation conventions from 1919 to 2003  
<http://www.arab-labor.org/> - homepage of the Arab Labour Organisation  
[http://www.arab-labor.org/e\\_arablabor/e\\_main.asp](http://www.arab-labor.org/e_arablabor/e_main.asp) - English version. Not fully functional.

# Campaign Materials

Following two basic documents for the nationwide Campaign to End the Occupation and For Labor Rights in Iraq (which are also available for download in PDF format from the USLAW website at [www.uslaboragainstawar.org](http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org):

\* A Model Resolution on the Occupation and Labor Rights in Iraq

\* A Petition on the Occupation and Labor Rights in Iraq Addressed to the Congress

## Here are some things you can do to build this Campaign:

1) Take the Model resolution (adapt it for your own conditions if necessary) and move it for adoption by your union, labor council or other labor organization. Be sure to notify USLAW once the resolution is adopted.

2) Help us gather thousands of signatures on our USLAW Petition by circulating it in your workplace and community and mailing it to the USLAW address listed on the petition.

3) When doing so, ask each signer if they would be willing to donate from \$1.00 to \$10.00 to a special Iraqi Labor Solidarity Fund that will be used to provide the newly organized unions in Iraq with badly needed office equipment, computers, furniture and supplies.

While no one should feel compelled to donate in order to sign the petition, many workers will gladly contribute something when they do sign if asked. You can col-

lect these funds and return them to USLAW with your completed petitions.

Contributions can also be made at the USLAW website to a special Labor Rights Solidarity Fund or by sending checks payable to USLAW-Labor Rights Campaign to P.O. Box 153, 1718 M Street NW, Washington, DC. 20036.

4) Use the adopted resolution and/or completed petitions as the basis for a meeting with your Congressional representatives. Take along the Fact Sheet and the various background articles from the website. (Click on "Campaigns," then on the link for the Campaign for Labor Rights.) Explain the need to convene Congressional hearings into the violation of basic labor rights in Iraq today — particularly the fact that Saddam Hussein's anti-union legislation is still being enforced.

5) Put together a speaking tour in your city — including meet-

ings at union halls and interviews on local radio stations — for Clarence Thomas and David Bacon, the two USLAW unionists who participated in the October 2003 international labor delegation to Iraq.

6) As part of the Campaign, USLAW will endeavor to obtain and post regular updates on the labor situation in Iraq. We will also provide a way in which U.S. workers can pose questions to Iraqi union activists and will publish their responses on the website as they become available. Petition signers who provide an email address will also be able to receive these weekly updates and responses to questions directly at their email address.

Also available from USLAW: Profile of U.S. Corporations Awarded Contracts in U.S./British Occupied Iraq

This may be downloaded at [www.uslaboragainstawar.org/resources/resource.pho?id+244](http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/resources/resource.pho?id+244) or order the printed report online.



*Workers at the State Leather Factory explain the fact that when they tried to negotiate over their low wages, they were told that it was illegal for them to have a union and bargain.*

# Model Resolution on the Occupation and Labor Rights in Iraq

*Whereas:* Since George W. Bush declared an end to the war on Iraq in April, 2003, unemployment among Iraqi workers has reached 70%, causing many families to face hunger and dislocation, and

*Whereas:* Since Bush announced the war's end, the US occupying authority has frozen Iraqi wages for most workers at \$60/month, while at the same time eliminating bonuses, profit sharing, and subsidies for food and housing, causing a sharp cut in the income of those Iraqi workers still employed, and

*Whereas:* \$87 billion was appropriated by Congress supposedly for the reconstruction of Iraq, yet not a dime is set to be used for raising Iraqi wages or for unemployment benefits, and these extraordinary expenditures will come at the expense of services and jobs here in the US, and

*Whereas:* Since April, 2003, Iraqi workers have begun to reorganize their trade union movement, seeking a better standard of living, and to preserve their jobs and workplaces, and

*Whereas:* The US occupation authority has continued to enforce a 1987 law issued by Saddam Hussein prohibiting unions and collective bargaining in the public sector and state enterprises where most Iraqis work, and

*Whereas:* The US occupation au-

thority has announced it intends to sell off the factories, refineries, mines and other state enterprises despite the fact that these enterprises belong to the Iraqi people, not to the US, and has issued a new decree, Public Order 39, allowing 100% foreign ownership of Iraqi businesses and the repatriation of profits in effect making resistance to privatization illegal for Iraqi unions and preventing workers from having any voice in the future of their own jobs, and



*At the Mamoun Vegetable Oil plant, the control panel for a plastic injection molding machine is held together with string -- because of economic*

*Whereas:* The privatization of Iraqi workplaces would result in massive layoffs to Iraqi workers at a time when unemployment is already at crisis levels, and

*Whereas:* Iraqi unions are seeking to organize despite having no resources, while the US occupying authority withholds welfare funds, buildings and other assets previously held by unions controlled by Saddam Hussein's government, and  
*Whereas:* Workers in the United States have experienced an erosion

of our own labor rights to organize and collectively bargain in defense of our jobs, rights and working conditions and thus understand what the restriction or loss of these rights means to working people,

*Therefore be it resolved:* This local union (or other labor body) calls for full trade union rights in Iraq, for immediate nullification of the 1987 Hussein law banning unions in public enterprises and any other restriction on the free exercise of labor rights, and

*Be it further resolved:* We call on the US occupation authority to immediately implement Conventions 87, 98 and 138 of the International Labor Organization guaranteeing the right to organize and bargain collectively, and prohibiting child labor, and to immediately halt the process of privatizing Iraqi workplaces and selling off the property of the Iraqi people, and

*Be it further resolved:* We call for an end to the US occupation of Iraq and return of U.S. troops to their homes and families so that Iraq can be governed by its own people,

*Be it further resolved:* We call for a Congressional investigation of the suppression of trade union rights in Iraq and the privatization of Iraqi workplaces and selling off of the property of the Iraqi people, and

*Be it finally resolved:* We will encourage donations of material resources such as computers, telephones, fax machines and office furniture, as well as money to the Fund to Support Iraqi Labor Rights established by US Labor Against the War.

U.S. LABOR AGAINST THE WAR  
P.O. Box 153, 1718 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036

## The Occupation & Labor Rights in Iraq Petition to the Congress

We, the undersigned, call for internationally recognized trade union rights for workers in Iraq -- the right to organize in the union of their choice, to bargain and, when necessary, to strike AND for those same rights to be respected by corporations and enforced by the government in THIS country.

We call for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to stop enforcing Saddam Hussein's 1987 law banning unions in the public sector and state-owned enterprises, where the majority of Iraqis work.

We call on the U.S. to halt all plans to privatize Iraq's assets and state-owned enterprises. Let the people of Iraq decide their country's future.

We want U.S. troops returned to their homes and families now.

We want our tax dollars spent on infrastructure repair, rebuilding schools and providing health care in Iraq AND in the U.S., not to line the pockets of well-connected multinational corporations and arms merchants.

We call on Congress to investigate the violation of labor rights in Iraq, corporate profiteering, and cronyism and favoritism in dispensing contracts for work in Iraq.

(Please print neatly)

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