

Iraq Trade Union Rights

Welcome to the Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin!

Worker Rights and Trade Union Rights Violations:

Reports from Iraqi Unions

Iraqi unions have long been the target of intimidation and government interference. Now, organized labor is once again finding itself as an object of hostility.

Suffering under antiquated laws and violence, Iraqi labor is pressing forward in hopes of gaining acceptance and just conditions of employment. The *Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin* aims to detail the workers' plight and gain solidarity with their movement.

More Government-Ordered Work Transfers Target Union Leaders

Ministry of Industry

Iraqi unions report additional transfer orders against 10 more worker leaders in June ([see our April issue](#)). On June 1, hundreds of workers employed by ministry-operated enterprises gathered in a Baghdad square, intending to march to the ministry building and demand the right to negotiate with officials over the announcement of several thousand new layoffs.

As explained by the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), these workers are known as the "politically dismissed." Under the previous regime they were sacked for falling out of favor with the Ba'th Party, but had been reinstated when the government of Saddam Hussein fell—only to now face layoffs again.

The unions recount how the demonstration became very tense as security officials intimidated demonstrators by brandishing firearms and even physically attacking some demonstrators. As reported by the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), 10 workers being transferred out of their jobs were leaders of the demonstration.

Ministry of Transportation

On June 2, the General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GFWCUI)

[announced](#) that four leaders of their port workers affiliate had been forcibly transferred from their jobs in Basra to the Railways Company in Mosul, 900 km north. The move came immediately following (and in possible retaliation for) a [demonstration](#) the union held at the port company headquarters in Ma'aqul, for which it had received prior approval from local security forces. The demonstration called for fair distribution of land to employees, hazard allowance, overtime benefits, and an internal investigation of corruption in the company's administration. Several other [Iraqi Unions](#) expressed their condemnation of the security forces' reaction to the demonstrating workers.

Closure of Union Offices

Iraqi unions have announced that their offices have been forcibly closed. Officials typically cite labor laws from the Saddam Hussein era that ban public sector unions as justifications for the closures. Oil workers report that the office space and premises they have historically used for tanker companies, drilling companies, the oil institute, and refinery and oil projects (all within the Ministry of Oil) have been officially closed to the unions.



Restrictions on Union Travel

In mid-May, a government-run union oversight committee published an announcement in Iraqi national newspapers that no trade unionist would be allowed to travel abroad on official union business without prior permission from the oversight committee itself—regardless of the purpose of the trip or how it is financed. GFIW requested the intervention of the ILO at this year's International Labor Conference. While the Iraqi government does not officially recognize all trade unions in Iraq, these restrictions have the potential to impact all of them. The International Trade Union Confederation [condemned the move immediately in a letter](#) to the Prime Minister of Iraq.

UPDATE from Oil Workers: Union Leaders in Court

In our [April issue](#), unions in the oil sector were fending off employer attempts to quell union activism. IFOU leaders faced criminal charges, and four refinery workers were transferred out of their jobs after leading job actions.

IFOU provided these updates:

IFOU President Hassan Juma'a Awwad,

Criminal case still pending before the Commission of Integrity.

The Ministry of Oil (which referred Juma'a to the Commission) has cited Article 327 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which prohibits public officials/agents from knowingly sharing information about company operations, and is punishable by a fine or three years in prison if it is found to harm the interests of the state.

This article has been criticized in a [joint report](#) by the organizations Article 19 and UNESCO as highly problematic for its vague and broad terminology, which can be used to restrict freedom of expression.

IFOU Vice President Faleh Abboud Ammara

Criminal case still pending before the Iraqi courts.

The Ministry of Oil has accused Ammara of inciting workers to protest and issuing statements against ministry oil policies. These allegations are being considered under Article 435 of the penal code, which makes it a crime to insult a person in a personal meeting, during the course of a telephone conversation, or in a private letter.

The joint report by the organizations Article 19 and UNESCO [has criticized](#) Article 435 as an unjustified

restriction on freedom of expression.

At his first court appearance, Ammara attempted to file a lawsuit against the Minister of Oil and the General Manager of the Southern Oil Company. He was told he would have to wait until after his case is decided. He is still awaiting a court date.

Refinery Workers Union President and IFOU Board member Ibrahim Radhi Abdul Wahid

Lawsuit against Oil Ministry pending.

On April 1, Wahid and three other workers were transferred from Basra, then referred to Baghdad for investigation into their role in a number of worker actions. Radhi has filed for reinstatement and continues to strongly challenge the transfers.



***Iraqi Union Campaigns:
Standing up for
Workers in Iraq!***

Unions Warn Health and Safety Is a Concern

FWCUI and GFWCUI report on dangerous conditions for industrial workers. GFWCUI is following up on reports from workers in the General Company of Engineering Industries about five recent serious injuries to construction workers who fell from high levels. Underuse of safety restraints has reportedly caused dozens of

preventable major and minor injuries. FWCUI reports that three workers died and four were badly injured on April 10, when one of the very old brick factories in the al Nahrawan area near Baghdad collapsed. The unions say health and safety problems go unnoticed due to inadequate labor inspection and the workers'

lack of knowledge about basic health and safety precautions. The ongoing official ban on unions in public-sector worksites also prevents unions from initiating broad-based safety education campaigns.

SPOTLIGHT ON: WOMEN WORKERS

Anti-worker labor legislation, violence and instability, and negative attitudes among managers (and in some unions) toward women in male-majority workplaces discourage women workers from playing a bigger role in their unions, according to FWCUI.

In Basra, FWCUI and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq recently co-sponsored two seminars on promoting a bigger role for women in union organizing. Working women from a number of industrial sectors discussed the need for building labor organizations in Iraq in which women and men play equal roles. They also examined obstacles to women's participation and leadership in Iraqi trade

unions and ways to overcome them.

FWCUI is investigating reports from workers of ongoing and unremedied sexual harassment in the workplace. Management has used the Saddam-era, anti-union laws to threaten to disband the union when workers have complained.

In 2005, FWCUI established the Center of Women Rights at Work, which it is trying to revive through projects such as the seminars.

Kurdish Women

[A recent TUC report](#) highlights women activists from Iraq-Kurdistan based unions who are working to promote women's rights. The

Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) accompanied a TUC-UNISON delegation on visits to two non-union factories where women worked six days a week for \$200 a month in substandard safety conditions while men earned higher wages for similar work. "If they were members of a trade union, then we could help them to secure their rights," Nazanin Tariq Ali, president for women in the KUWU, told the TUC-UNISON delegation. "I plan to come back to this factory and ask the workers to join the union."

KUWU and TUC-UNISON are partnering to support the empowerment of working women and women trade unionists in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Iraqi Trade Unions – Standing up for Workers in Iraq

[National Campaign for a Fair and Just Iraqi Labor Law](#)

The coalition of unions leading the National Campaign, spearheaded by GFIW, continues to raise awareness at the grassroots level and is building a broad coalition behind the push for a new law. In May, GFIW organized conferences in Kirkuk, Erbil, and Salah el Din where union activists signed up workers to support the campaign and fight for improved wages and working conditions through their unions. A union delegation met with

the labor and social security committee of the Kurdish Parliament to garner its support for a new labor law that would benefit all of Iraq's workers and guarantee freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. [They have also met directly with key political leaders in Baghdad to press the campaign.](#)

The Kurdistan General Workers Syndicate Union (now part of KUWU) is coordinating with GFIW's national campaign, while at the same time fighting for fundamental worker rights in

northern Iraq in the face of inadequate labor legislation. The union is working with the Kurdistan Regional Government to amend local labor and social security laws, raise the minimum and maximum pension salaries for which workers can be eligible, and add a pension benefit for workers disabled by a workplace injury. The Federation is reaching out to workers directly in workplaces to raise awareness about the need for improvements in social and labor legislation and to encourage workers to join the union as part of this campaign.



Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers – You Can Help!



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Members of [US Labor Against the War](#), Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), and the Chevron Program of Global Exchange are meeting to ratchet up their campaign in the United States to gain support for worker rights in Iraq. They are asking members of Congress to sign a letter, addressed to both the U.S. and Iraqi governments, that expresses their urgent concern that the Iraqi government expeditiously adopt a law that provides workers with all the protections afforded under ILO core conventions.

As part of this effort, they are drawing attention to what they see as the latest attacks on Iraqi unions, i.e., government restrictions on union travel, transferring workers in retaliation for union activity, and the criminal charges brought against IFOU members.

They will be building support for the campaign and raising money for union legal defense at trade union conventions this summer. They will also attend the IVAW national convention, the U.S. Social Forum, and

the LabourStart convention in Canada, where they will seek international support. They will develop a companion media campaign to shed light on the plight of trade unions and workers in Iraq. For more information, please contact internationalsolidarity@uslab.org or oragainstwar.org

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) [condemned the attacks](#) against demonstrating port workers, saying that it believes the move constitutes an attempt to "undermine and eventually eliminate the union."

The Executive Committee of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Union (ICEM) [denounced numerous recent prohibitions on trade union activities in Iraq](#) through a May 27 [resolution](#): "The ICEM Executive Committee condemns all of these Iraqi government acts against trade unions. We salute the bravery of our Iraqi brothers and sisters who continue to organize, represent and protect workers despite these attacks and a background of

continued and escalating violence in the society at large."

[Unions around the world](#) joined their Iraqi brothers and sisters in [condemning a terrorist attack](#) on a factory that killed more than 40 workers and injured dozens of others. A suicide bomber detonated his explosives in front of a textile factory at the end of the shift when workers were leaving for home. Unions in Iraq decried the uptick in violence, which they blamed on political infighting in the Iraqi government, and demanded security for factory workers.

The International Trade Union Confederation has issued its [Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations](#), which covers 2009. The [section on Iraq](#) describes how union elections are restricted "under a legal framework inherited from Saddam Hussein" and states unequivocally that Iraq's labor laws are in "dire need of reform."

Other Updates

The two major trade union federations in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Irbil-based Kurdistan General Workers Syndicate Union and the Suleimaniya-headquartered Iraqi Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union, announced a formal merger in May! The new Kurdistan United Workers Union will have a rotating presidency.

Yassin Aziz Ali and Hangaw Abdullah Khan are co-presidents of the new organization.

Read the TUC report:

[United as one—Iraqi Kurdistan federations unify to present one voice on workers' rights](#)

