



# Iraq Trade Union Rights

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## JOIN US!

Iraqi unions have long been the target of intimidation and government interference.

Suffering under antiquated laws and violence, Iraqi labor is pressing forward to establish labor rights and just conditions of employment for all Iraqi workers.

The *Iraq Trade Union Rights* Bulletin highlights this struggle and seeks to expand international solidarity with the Iraqi labor movement.

Please send feedback and information requests to [Iraqturights@solidaritycenter.org](mailto:Iraqturights@solidaritycenter.org)

## WORKER AND TRADE UNION RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

### Workers Targeted in Wave of Bombings

[Ongoing violence in Iraq](#) makes even travel to work a risk in many cities, and indiscriminate roadside bombs continue to kill people just trying to make a living for themselves and their families. On December 22, 2011, shortly after the official U.S. troop pullout, a wave of bombings ripped Baghdad. One of the explosions targeted construction workers—day laborers gathered to wait for the chance to be picked for a job. NINA news [reported](#) three dead and twenty five injured.

“This [wave of explosions] clearly shows the eagerness of terrorists to stop the reconstruction and progress in our dear Iraq and to drown the country in ethnic violence again,

after Iraqi people have resisted those attempts in the past,” said the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) in a [written statement](#) condemning the attacks.

Likewise, the General Federation of Trade Unions and Workers Councils in Iraq (GFTUWCI) issued a [written statement](#) condemning this event and clarifying that it is the political entities which participate in the political process that are responsible for the collapse of the security situation, as well as the security forces. GFTUWCI added “the political conflicts have caused the deterioration of the security environment, the economy, and social services.”

### Federations Single out Employers, Government for Worker Rights Violations

The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) and the the General Federation of Trade Unions and Workers Councils in Iraq (GFTUWCI) are carefully documenting union and worker rights violations. They are demanding that companies and the government honor their obligation to respect worker rights and provide just compensation. And they are calling on all Iraqi workers as well as international allies to condemn the government’s failure to protect worker rights.

Following [a review of 2011 incidences](#), FWCUI developed a set of key recommendations focusing on the government’s responsibility to ensure that worker rights are protected and procedures introduced to ensure a safe and healthy working environment. The union also emphasized the importance of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, and it called for support from international organizations. Such measures are vital for the promotion of employment security and stability in Iraq, says FWCUI.

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## Federations Single out Employers, Government for Worker Rights Violations

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In an October 4, 2011, [statement](#), GFTUWCI condemned the government and the private sector for violations of worker and trade union rights in three instances where workers were not properly compensated after being laid off.

GFTUWCI accused the National Company of Food Industries of failing to pay 360 employees after closing departments and production lines as a precursor to selling company property and laying off workers.

Union members employed at the National Company of Metal Industries also were forced to take early retirement, then offered their jobs back as day laborers with no rights or benefits.

Finally, garment workers were laid off without proper compensation or due process.

A month later, GFTUWCI filed a bitter [complaint](#) against the Ministry of Industry for its failure to pay pensions to retirees who had contributed to the pension fund throughout their years of service. GFTUWCI accused employers of negligence in not submitting the contributions to the General Tax Authority.

The November 2, 2011, statement urged the Iraqi government to address this matter immediately and relieve workers from their intolerable burden.

Both federations said that they consider these cases violations of International Labor Organization conventions and demanded the government provide restitution for all of the workers.

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**“The GFTUWCI reports that the National Company of Food Industries failed to paid the salaries of 360 workers after closing departments and production lines as a precursor to selling company property and laying off workers.”**

## 2011 Annual Survey of Violations for Trade Unions Rights

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) publishes an annual report on violations to trade union rights, detailing the violations under the law and in practice for each country.

The report for Iraq is available [here](#).

This report highlights the continued interference by the government in union affairs and the continued struggle for a new labor law in compliance with core labor standards.



Iraqi Trade Unions call for FoA. Photo by Wesam Chaseb

## IRAQI UNIONS STAND UP FOR WORKER RIGHTS

### Health Care Workers Gain Significant Benefits after Nationwide Protest

Following a November 5 demonstration by hundreds of health care workers in nearly a dozen cities throughout Iraq, union representatives and members of parliament negotiated to reform labor laws in the workers' favor. The workers, members of the independent Union of Health Professional Employees (UHPE) demanded the right for health care workers to freely organize, engage in collective bargaining, and the elimination of a fixed organizational structure that effectively denies promotion prospects for many workers.



Health workers protest in Iraq. Photo by GFIW

Demonstrations were held in [Baghdad](#), [Thi-qar](#), [Babylon](#), [Basra](#), [Muthana](#), [Karbala](#), [Missan](#), and [Qadsya](#). The workers received support from two major Iraqi union federations. A [delegation from GFIW affiliated unions in Muthana province joined the demonstrators](#) in the capital Al Samawa, located between Baghdad and Basra. FWCUI members also joined the protest.

On November 29, members of the Health and Environment Committee met with union representatives from Baghdad and other provinces to discuss the workers' demands and to collect information on the unique challenges that confront health care workers.

The groups [agreed on a number of recommendations](#), including abolishing restrictive laws that limit on salary increases for qualified, longtime workers and enacting new laws aimed at implementing the rights of health care workers, especially in relation to salaries and allowances, housing, and overtime compensation. These measures would bring salaries and benefits of health care employees in the ministry into line with those of colleagues in other ministries and into compliance with Law (22) – 2008, the Law of Salaries for Public Employees.

### Unions in Basra Launch Unity Campaign

In the lead-up to a February 2012 conference held by the International Trade Union Confederation in Baghdad, unions and major labor federations in Basra launched a unity campaign aimed at strong and effective representation. The groups met three times between October and December 2011. Their goals were to unite views among the

various influential counterparts in Basra; foster links with other independent trade unions in the Basra region, including health care workers and computer programmers; and prepare papers on labor law reform, freedom of association in the public sector, and union pluralism in Iraq for presentation at the ITUC conference.

Participating unions included the IFOU, the Port Workers Union, and the union of the engineering-workers careers. Participants determined that further outreach would continue, in particular with the GFTUCWI and GFIW offices in Basra.

Further meetings were planned prior to the ITUC conference.

## FWCUI: Withdrawal Is not Enough

In a powerful open letter to U.S. President Barack Obama titled [“Withdrawal Is not Enough.”](#) FWCUI President Fallah Alwan called on the U.S. government to admit responsibility for the suffering of Iraqi people during the nine-year occupation and to provide compensation for the devastation caused by the war. The letter focused on the need for massive infrastructural developments after the invasion led to significant sectarian strife, the collapse of the education system, and the destruction of community resources along with

historical and cultural artifacts and heritage. The letter also sharply criticized the corruption endemic at all levels of the political system. But it is also a profound call for peace in Iraq and globally—a call for equality and an end to injustice.

“Our voices reflect the wishes of billions of people throughout the world,” said Alwan, “especially the American public who called for freedom from fighting wars and who asked to live in peace with other peoples.”

## Um Qasr Protest

On October 26, at a demonstration covered by local television, workers at Umm Qasr Silo [rallied](#) in Basra against administrative corruption in the company. The workers, members of GFWCUI, demanded salary levels compatible with those earned by employees in the Ministries of Oil and Electricity, including an adjustment owed since 2008. The union threatened to escalate the action if demands were not met.



Um Qasr protest Photo by GFWCUI

## Protest at the Ministry of Trade

On December 18 FWCUI reported, employees of affiliated companies of the Ministry of Trade held a sit-in at their workplaces to demand salary increases, equitable distribution of annual profits, and modifications in the professional ranking system aimed at improving promotion prospects. In line with other protests, reports FWCUI, the workers also demanded the implementation of a new labor code compliant with international standards.



Protest at the Ministry of Trade. Photo by FWCUI

## Workers Demand their Constitutional Rights

[On December 14](#), 2011, more than 150 workers gathered in the center of Baghdad to demand the government to activate pro labor legislation to ensure worker rights that are guaranteed by the Constitution, the GFIW reported. The workers demanded also to be approved for loans that are granted to civil servants by the ministry of finance. The protesters were protected by security forces, who sealed off the roads to accommodate the demonstration.



Iraqi workers demand their constitutional rights. Photo by GFIW

## GLOBAL SOLIDARITY WITH IRAQI WORKERS

### Iraqi Union Leaders Learn the Ins and Outs of International Lending



Iraqi union leaders learn the ins and outs of international lending. Photo by the Solidarity Center.

Iraqi workers have the right to access information on worker rights when their companies receive loans from international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In October, 2011 leaders from all five major Iraqi union federations attended a workshop in Beirut to learn about IFI lending policies and performance standards linked to ILO core labor standards. They also received instructions for submitting complaints to the IFIs and developing feasible implementation plans.

Wesam Chaseb, Solidarity Center program officer in Iraq, presented a detailed report on his empirical research into working conditions and labor-management relations at the Gulftainer Company, which handles shipping containers for 40 companies worldwide, including at the Khawr Abdallah terminal in Basra. Chaseb also reviewed the Solidarity Center's research conducted in partnership with the

Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) at UCC cement plants in Bazian and Tasluja (see [Bulletin, Volume 2, Issue 3, page 5](#)). UCC management cooperated in the study, enabling productive labor-management meetings.

The Beirut workshop provided a framework for developing union strategies when facing international financial institutions in Iraq. A key focus was using [International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 2](#), which governs labor and working conditions. Participants also discussed how to ensure proper implementation by working in cooperation with the Solidarity Center, the International Trade Union Confederation, and global union federations, including the International Transport Workers' Federation and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions, representatives of which were also present.

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## FWCUI Supports Striking British Public-Sector Workers

As British public sector trade unions were [planning strike action](#) in November 2011 over the pension rights of 2 million workers, the British government threatened to withdraw an offer union leaders said had not been made, if the strike took place. In a spirit of international labor solidarity, FWCUI wrote an open [letter of support](#), pointing out that the attack on public-sector workers in Britain was similar to attacks being waged globally to make workers and their families pay for the ongoing economic crisis while preventing their union representatives from engaging in dialogue about issues that affect "billions of people, not just bankers and bosses."

## Unions Discuss Labor Movement's Role in Arab Spring



FWCUI conducts its 8th Annual Conference in Baghdad. Photo by FWCUI

More than 30 FWCUI representatives attended [a December 17, 2011, meeting](#) in Baghdad to confirm the federation's position as a defender of worker rights across the country, even in the government sector where independent unions are still banned. On the agenda:

Unions' role in the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia and Egypt; protests in Iraq were prominent in the early stages but diminished as the year progressed.

A concept paper on privatization, followed by a discussion of investment strategies and the privatized environment. FWCUI remains highly skeptical of the privatization process given the unfavorable economic environment in Iraq.

Evaluation by FWCUI and GFIW leaders of areas of clearly identifiable common interest as a way to coordinate practical actions between the two union organizations.

An update of the labor law, still under review. The Solidarity Center listed major points of concern in the proposed draft, and FWCUI will evaluate after having the opportunity to thoroughly study these comments. The Solidarity Center Baghdad program officer was an invited guest and speaker at the Congress.

## UPDATE

### IFOU Still Fighting Illegal Transfers of Oil Union Activists

Despite a court order to return two IFOU leaders who were transferred hundreds of miles away from their home posts in Basra in March 2011, they remained at the drilling operation to which they had been moved more than a year ago. IFOU argued that the transfers of Ibrahim Radhi, vice-president of IFOU, and his colleague Faraj Rabat Mizban, an IFOU executive committee member and media officer, were in retaliation for their participation in legal trade union protests and constituted union-busting ([see Bulletin, Volume 1, Issue 1, page 1](#)). On appeal, the court overturned the transfers and ordered the men's return to the refinery on September 29. The union has pledged to continue fighting for their reinstatement. Radhi was allowed to return to his rightful workplace in March 2012, but the saga continues for Mizban.

### GFWCUI Becomes General Federation of Trade Unions and Workers Councils in Iraq (GFTUWCI)

At its second council meeting, held November 26, 2011, in Baghdad, GFWCUI officially changed its name to General Federation of Trade Unions and Workers Councils of Iraq (GFTUWCI) to more readily distinguish itself from FWCUI. Delegates at the meeting discussed the many challenges for Iraqi unions and developed recommendations for dealing with the major issues the union confronts particularly the deletion of a chapter on unions from the draft labor law with no union consultation. The federation condemned the government's continuous interference in the trade union election process.