

Iraq Trade Union Rights

Welcome to the Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin!

Nov/Dec 2010
Volume 1, Issue 4

Worker and Trade Union Rights Violations: Reports from Iraqi Unions



Policemen face residents protesting electricity shortages and inadequate services in Nassiriya, southeast of Baghdad, on August 22, 2010. © 2010 Reuters

Human Rights Watch Defends Freedom of Assembly in Iraq

A September 17, 2010, [Human Rights Watch report](#) calls for Iraqi authorities to stop blocking peaceful demonstrations and arresting and intimidating organizers. The Interior Ministry issued new regulations in June that require demonstration organizers to get "written approval of both the Minister of Interior and the Provincial Governor" not less than 72 hours before a planned event. According to the report, "In the past few months, the government has refused to authorize numerous requests for public demonstrations, with no explanation. Authorities have also arrested and intimidated organizers and protesters, and policing actions have led to deaths and injuries. The clampdown has created a climate of fear among organizers and demonstrators."

The report quotes Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI): "It has become impossible to get permission to protest the government's failure to provide services, so people stop trying." Alwan, who has organized dozens of marches and protests since 2003, said that the law effectively bans demonstrations.

"To take away the rights and freedoms Iraqis have been promised in exchange for all the suffering they have endured since the war is to add insult to injury," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director for Human Rights Watch. "When will Iraqi officials learn that silencing the voice of the people is only a formula for strife?"

Join Us!

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.

Please send feedback and information requests to iraqturights@solidaritycenter.org



More Worker and Trade Union Rights Violations

Re-Fired! 553 Mechanical Industries Employees Fired for Political Reasons under Former Regime

The General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GFWCUI) and the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) have reported that the Ministry of Industry (MOI) issued resolutions on August 3 and 13, 2010, eliminating the decision to re-employ 553 workers at the General Company for Mechanical Industries.

The 553 workers were among thousands fired for political reasons by the former regime (see [June 2010](#) issue), then rehired and compensated for the years they were dismissed under Decree 51 of 2003 and Decree 24 of 2005. According to the unions, a new committee at the MOI conducted a reassessment of the rehires and claims that the workers did not show proper evidence of their political activity or proof of their previous employment.

GFWCUI President Saied Ni'ma, one of the targeted workers, is challenging the MOI, saying that the decision against him is due to his union activism and his strong positions against the Ministry's policies he calls "anti-worker."

Port Workers Threatened with Termination for Attending ITF Workshop

Two Basra port workers, including the president of the Port Workers Union, were threatened with losing their jobs and are now under investigation by the Iraqi Port Committee after participating in a Beirut, Lebanon, workshop to which they were invited by the [International Transport Federation](#) (ITF). According to an internal memo, obtained by workers and shared with the ITF, the workers failed to notify their company that the workshop required them to travel outside the country under the conditions of a May 2010 [government order](#).

Local Authority Threatens to Fire Union Activists

The [GFIW](#) reports that the Office of the Inspector General at the Ministry of Electricity in Nineveh province issued an August 15, 2010, statement threatening to fire workers who engage in union activities during official working hours on the ground that such activities are illegal. The Inspector General went on to say that these union activities are marred by unsound administrative and financial practices. He stressed that he will fire any

worker who refuses to abide by this law and urged the unionists to get involved in other civil society organizations instead.

Iraqi Union Campaigns: Standing up for Workers in Iraq

First Episode of "Worker's Affairs TV" Airs on Nilesat Satellite Channel

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the media section of the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) launched a weekly worker's affairs TV program on Nilesat's Al Jamaheer satellite channel. The first 45-minute episode, broadcast at 8:00 p.m. on Saturday October 23, 2010, focused on worker issues, daily challenges in the workplace, and the prevailing labor laws. For this episode, the producer interviewed seven workers on the job. The program has already gained a wide audience. The Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) has requested a viewing from the producer and offered to support the program following the first 15 episodes.



Electrical Workers Peacefully Protest Denial of Freedom of Association

On October 17, 2010, the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) electrical workers affiliate in Basra held a [peaceful protest](#) against a ministerial order restricting the work of electricity unions. Protest leaders stated: "This gathering is to urge the workers to continue their protests against the orders of Minister Sharhistrani to prevent the unions." They added: "It is important to organize gatherings inside the workplaces, to show the administration that we are able to resume our activities and unions despite the ministerial orders."

More Iraqi Union Campaigns

GFWCUI Event Highlights Unions' Role in Democracy

On October 25, 2010, the GFWCUI and the Basra Research Center at Basra University co-sponsored an examination of the state of trade unionism in Basra. The event was attended by faculty, students, women activists, and prominent labor leaders. They discussed a broad range of union-related topics, including the role of unionism in society and democracy, the history of labor in Iraq, the current anti-union environment that Iraqi unionists are facing, and attacks by the Iraqi government on the legitimacy of unions in Iraq despite legal protections in the Iraqi constitution and the ILO conventions.

GFIW Central Council Discusses Union Elections

On October 30, 2010, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers central council board executives met to discuss the fact that a ministerial committee charged with oversight of union elections has set and then postponed union elections several times. The government's committee, which is tasked with organizing the elections, has called for union leadership elections in April 2011. [Several unions have challenged this process as premature](#) in the absence of a labor law which guarantees the right of Iraq's large public sector workforce to form unions.

Leather Workers Successfully Strike to Protest Loss of Hazard Pay

FWCUI reports that workers in a Baghdad leather factory went on strike on October 25, 2010, to demand that managers reinstate recently removed hazard pay. After several hours, managers agreed to offer an equivalent bonus, according to the union. The workers resumed production the next day.

KUWU Trains Workers and Helps Adjust Social Security Law

Thanks to input provided by the KUWU during September-October meetings with the MoLSA, social security law 39 of 1971 has been modified. New workplaces with more than three employees are now entitled to social security. The KUWU also visited numerous workplaces in the fall, to see firsthand the working conditions and challenges faced by its membership. The union also held regular training and awareness-raising seminars for members.

Global Solidarity
with Iraqi Workers—
You Can Help !

ICEM Supports Iraqi Workers

Delegates to the September 6, 2010, [World Energy Conference](#) of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) in Norway heard a presentation by Hashmeyya Muhsin Hussein, ICEM Executive Committee member and Electrical Utility Workers Union-GFIW president, and Abdulah Muhsin, international representative of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, about the challenges they face organizing and representing workers in the absence of laws protecting union rights in Iraq. After hearing the two union leaders speak, delegates unanimously confirmed the importance of the May 27, 2010, ICEM [Executive Committee resolution](#) and resolved to intensify their support and solidarity work with ICEM affiliates in Iraq struggling for fundamental trade union and human rights and a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic society.

In November, ICEM published a [statement](#) supporting Iraqi workers and condemning the ongoing attacks against Iraqi unions: "It is unconscionable that seven years after the fall of Saddam, and 23 years after his notorious Public Law 150 banning all trade union activity in the public sector, Iraq is still without a legal framework for industrial relations that meets ILO standards. Sadly, the Saddam-era ban was one of the few laws not overturned by the occupation administration when it took power."

According to the statement, "Iraqi trade union development and full trade union rights for the country's unions" have been priorities of ICEM's work plan since 2007.

"We demand the immediate repeal of all restrictions on union activity and the immediate enactment of fair labor legislation which fully complies with ILO Conventions and provides fundamental human and trade union rights as provided in the Iraqi constitution," read the statement. It went on to Pledge "to continue to do what is necessary to assist Iraqi trade unions in winning their fight."

Updates

Freedom of Association a Building Block of Democracy, Says U.S. Congress

In a September 29, 2010, [letter](#) to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, 21 U.S. congressional representatives expressed their concern over the lack of a labor law that protects workers in Iraq. "The right of freedom of association—the ability of workers to join unions of their choice, free from government interference, intimidation or repression—is one of the fundamental building blocks of democratic societies." The letter was a result of outreach to the U.S. Congress by US Labor Against the War, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and the Chevron Program of Global Exchange reported on in the [June 2010](#) issue.

Ministry of Oil to GFIW: Unions Still Not Allowed

An October 3, 2010, memo from the Ministry of Oil to the General Federation of Iraqi Workers reaffirmed an advisory to oil companies that oil workers unions are not allowed in either the Ministry of Oil or any of the companies it oversees.

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The Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin is a project of the Solidarity Center. To learn more about the Solidarity Center's work to promote trade union rights in Iraq and worldwide, please visit www.solidaritycenter.org

More Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers

Respect ILO Conventions, AFT President Tells Iraqi Prime Minister

[American Federation of Teachers](#) President Randi Weingarten expressed her union's concern that workers in the oil and electricity sectors are banned from forming unions. "We decry reports coming from other parts of Iraq that have spoken of the forced closure of union offices, the seizure of union assets, and the sudden transfer of union activists to outlying regions," wrote Weingarten in a September 10, 2010, [letter](#) to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "We protest prohibitions on union activists wishing to travel outside the country, and the issuance of criminal charges against labor organizers." Weingarten further asked that Iraq adhere to the International Labor Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

British TUC Outraged at Attack on Iraqi Teachers' Union

British [Trades Union Congress](#) General Secretary Brendan Barber wrote to the head of the Iraqi Teachers' Union, Dr. Muhsin Ali Nassif, expressing his outrage at a November 20, 2010, attack on the union's Baghdad headquarters. Two bombs were detonated as Nassif was leaving the building. "It is an outrage that people must risk their lives simply to represent the interests of working people," Barber wrote. "If the new Iraqi Government is serious about bringing peace and prosperity to Iraq it must swiftly identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. It also needs to finally enact a fair and just labor law that recognizes and promotes the right of all workers—especially teachers—to join strong, free, and independent trade unions, and to do so without facing harassment, especially the extreme violence that you have faced."

Appeal for Iraqi Worker Rights Circulated at Open World Conference

At the November 2010 Open World Conference, held in Algiers, Algeria, [an appeal](#) was circulated jointly by US Labor Against the War, Iraq Federation of Oil Unions President Hassan Juma'a Awad, and Electrical Utility Workers Union-GFIW President Hashmeyya Muhsin Hussein to the more than 400 delegates from 64 countries in attendance. The appeal called for the creation of a fair labor law in Iraq, defended the rights of Iraqi workers to join free and open unions without facing harassment and intimidation, and called on the Iraqi government to take back the recent ban that prohibits Iraqi unionists from traveling abroad.

Iraqi Women Workers Connect and Seek Solutions to Common Issues

More than two dozen women from across Iraq, representing six union federations in the country's energy and petrochemicals sector, met in Basra in mid-December 2010 to strengthen ties, find solutions to common problems, and organize efforts to improve the Saddam-era laws that still govern the Iraqi labor environment.

The women brought a broad spectrum of experience. Some had just joined their union, while others had more than 15 years in the local labor movement. Over the three-day workshop, they all explored the role for union women in their country's future.

"We are bringing women into the process and helping them move forward," said Hashmeyya Muhsin Hussein, president of the Electrical Utility Workers Union-GFIW. "We are working to build confidence in women, and this will push them to the next level of leadership within their locals."

One activity asked participants to imagine the Iraq they would like to see in 2025. Other sessions dwelt on Iraq's labor code, which currently reflects Saddam Hussein-era laws. New labor law was drafted in 2004, but workers have had little opportunity to provide input.

Participants committed to ensuring that Iraq's legal environment takes into account working women. And now that a comment period for the bill has opened, they will work toward ensuring the new labor law addresses key worker rights.

"They are thrilled with the information provided. The women want to contribute on a deeper level," said Hussein. "One woman told me, 'I went in as an empty vessel and left overflowing.'"

The workshop—the third of its kind—was planned and conducted by the Solidarity Center in cooperation with the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM). It focused on the development of a working women's agenda in Iraq and included discussions on basic rights, violence against women, gender equity in the workplace and beyond, and ways in which unions could address some of these issues.



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*Hashmeyya Muhsin Hussein,
President, Electrical Utility Workers
Union-GFIW*