GOVERNMENT ORDERED UNION SHUT-DOWNS ALARM LABOR ACTIVISTS

Carrying out a July 20, 2010, order from the Minister of Electricity, police raided and shut down electricity unions across Iraq. This is the latest attack on Iraqi workers by authorities invoking Saddam-era labor laws. Although Iraqi labor laws on the books since 1987 forbid public sector workers to form unions, in practice they have been doing so since the U.S.-led invasion toppled the regime, and union leaders have been working to negotiate improved wages and working conditions throughout the government sector. The July 20 order prohibits all trade union activities at the ministry and authorizes the police to close all trade union offices and bases and to take control of unions’ assets, properties and documents, furniture, and computers. It also empowers ministry management to cease all communication with the union and to renego on previously negotiated benefits. The Ministry of the Interior (which has oversight over multiple security forces) instructed Ministry of Electricity police to carry out the order nationwide and to threaten legal action against anyone found not in compliance. Electricity unions nationwide reported that ministry police acted swiftly to close union offices and confiscate union materials. Hashmeya Muhsin Hussein, president of the Basra-based Iraq electrical workers union, told Iraq Oil Report, “We are decrying and condemning such decisions made against us and we shall carry on our struggle through all peaceful means such as protests and strikes.”

Electricity unions and labor allies across the country rallied in Baghdad’s Karamana Square on August 1 and in Samarra on August 5 to protest the crackdown and decry Iraq’s inadequate electricity services, for which workers placed the blame squarely on the ministry and the Iraqi government. This was not the first time Iraqis had demonstrated against poor service. In June, two citizens were killed during demonstrations in Basra over the lack of reliable electricity while summer temperatures soared. At that time, local unions issued a statement protesting the use of police violence and demanding that local and national governments take charge and bring adequate public services to the people.

The Iraqi labor movement unanimously condemned the order. "The arbitrary action taken by the Ministry of Electricity and the measures it used to close down the offices of the unions is unacceptable by the whole Iraqi trade union movement,” said the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), of which the electricity union is an affiliate, in a July 30 statement. "Iraqi workers insist on the legitimate right of workers in the public sector, which employs thousands of workers on permanent and temporary contracts, to join a trade union, as enshrined in the new Iraqi constitution.” On August 4, the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) called these anti-union actions “an organized war against basic rights.” On August 9, the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) and the General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GPWCI) jointly announced the formation of a coordinating committee to defend worker rights in Basra. The committee will include participants from electricity, oil, and ports unions from all union federations operating in the southern regions of Iraq.
More Unions Banned and an Update on Unions in Court

PORT UNIONS BANNED TOO?
GFWCUI and FWCU report that on July 18, the office of the Inspector General for the Transport Ministry issued an order to close union offices and confiscate union material from the ports in Umm Qasr and Khor al Zubair.

UNION LEADERS CONTINUE TO FACE LEGAL CHARGES
FWCUI reports that an activist was jailed for six months last year after confronting managers of the Faw port with documents alleging widespread corruption. According to the union, he was charged with “slandering and libeling an official.” On his release from jail, he was fired. His termination was reported as a resignation.

Ali Abbas Khafeef, vice president of the GFWCUI branch in Basra, reports that as of July, he is facing the same charges as IFOU leaders are facing (see the June 2010 issue): “Inciting workers to protest and issuing statements against Ministry of Oil policies.” Khafeef says, however, that the charges have not been made any more explicit to him by the courts and that he is awaiting instructions to appear.

The criminal cases against IFOU President Hasan Juma’a Awwad and VP Ammara are still pending.

Civil Society Affairs Minister Announces Union Elections

In 2004, the Iraqi Governing Council issued Governing Council Decree No. 3, aimed at dissolving newly-formed federations, and placed the process of establishing new legally sanctioned unions under the auspices of the Iraqi government. The decree also aimed to bar all Ba’th Party members of a certain rank from leading a union. The committee charged with implementing Decree No. 3 is headed by the Minister of Civil Society Affairs and includes representatives of the involved ministries—Interior, Justice, Finance, National Security Affairs, and Parliamentary Affairs—as well as the Office of Nongovernmental Organizations and the High Commission for Integrity and Justice. On June 17, 2010, the committee announced in major newspapers its intention to set up a preparatory committee tasked with organizing elections. The elections must take place within 90 days of the announcement. In the absence of a law guaranteeing public sector workers the right to organize, unions across Iraq swiftly decried the announcement as another government attempt to cement the illegality of public sector unions. The international worker rights community has previously condemned the committee’s attempt to impose union elections before enacting labor law reform, saying that such an imposition would de facto prevent Iraqi workers from choosing their own unions to represent them.

Iraqi Union Campaigns — Standing up for Workers in Iraq!
SPOTLIGHT ON: Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers

The Ministry of Electricity's July 20 memo (see page 1) drew strong condemnation from the global labor community. Worker rights supporters worldwide rallied to protest the harsh crackdown and defend Iraqi workers' fundamental rights. "This order clearly violates trade union rights and unjustly limits the democratic aspirations of Iraq's workers," wrote AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka in a letter to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. "Instead of working with unions to build democratic labor laws which live up to international standards, your government continues to implement anti-union labor laws and practices which originated in a far less democratic and less hopeful era of Iraqi history." TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber asked the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs "to call on the Iraqi Government, as a matter of urgency, to withdraw the order, and allow unions to operate freely, underpinned by a fair, just and ILO-compliant labour law.” LabourStart launched an urgent appeal for protest letters to the Acting Minister of Electricity.

Iraqi workers received pledges of broad-based international labor support at the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Congress, held June 21-25 in Vancouver, British Columbia, as well as at the LabourStart Global Solidarity Conference, held July 9-11 in Hamilton, Ontario. At a side meeting during the ITUC Congress, 50 trade union leaders from Europe, North America, and the Middle East joined leaders of several prominent global union federations to hear FWCU and GFIW representatives describe the struggle for worker rights in Iraq. The ITUC pledged support for Iraqi unions in their fight for a new labor law. At the LabourStart Conference, international activists discussed the current state of Iraqi unions and heard examples of how unions around the world are joining forces with their Iraqi counterparts.

U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW) has launched an action alert asking supporters to request that their members of Congress co-sign a letter to Prime Minister Al-Maliki that condemns the ongoing violations of worker rights and calls for his government to enact a basic labor law in compliance with ILO core labor standards. The alert asks: "After seven years of building 'democracy' in Iraq, why don't Iraqi workers have the right to join a union?"

Two of the AFL-CIO's largest affiliates, the American Federation of Teachers and the Communications Workers of America, passed resolutions at their conventions this summer in support of Iraqi worker rights. The California State Federation of Labor joined the call at its July Convention.

Iraqi Trade Unions – Standing up for Workers in Iraq

As part of its ongoing campaign to improve retirement and Social Security laws for the benefit of workers in the regions governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) participated in a government-sponsored conference held July 11-12. The conference gave labor representatives an opportunity to propose amendments to these laws directly to the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs in Kurdistan. Also in attendance were representatives from the labor committee in the Kurdish parliament, the Kurdish Chamber of Commerce, and local experts on Social Security and labor law. KUWU hopes that its campaign will result in tangible benefits for workers in Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition to this high-level advocacy, KUWU-affiliated oil and transportation unions in Suleimaniya are joining together to build power and solidarity among workers at the grassroots level.

GFIW reported on two important June victories for workers in Baghdad. As a result of a meeting with the General Manager of Al Hilal Industrial Company, GFIW successfully stopped the company from issuing early retirement orders for 56 workers who would have otherwise ended up the large unemployment rolls in the country. In addition, GFIW representatives joined its garment union affiliate, the General Union of Textile and Garment Workers, at the bargaining table with management of the Modern Garment Company in Baghdad. Workers celebrated the important new benefits won through negotiations, including paid Saturday days off, full-time employment for temporary workers, appointment of an on-site physician, and a commitment to raise workers’ wages, starting with a new bonus effective immediately.
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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

Iraq Trade Union Rights

Other Updates

On June 18, some 65 activists representing 12 unions voted in a new executive board of the FWCUI branch in Samarra. Qusai Wajeeh Alwash was elected president. The vote also marked the first-time election of a woman, Ahlam Taha Najim.

Ibrahim Radhi, president of the Refinery Workers Union and IFOU board member, is pleased to announce that he and four other refinery union activists have won their long battle to overturn their transfers! As reported in our April 2010 issue, on April 1, the government-owned Southern Oil Company transferred four leaders of Iraq’s Basra-based Refinery Workers Union after they had organized demonstrations for improved wages and working conditions in the refinery.

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