

Iraq Trade Union Rights

Welcome to the Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin!

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Oil Union President among Latest Forced Transfers of Oil Workers

The Oil Ministry and state-owned North Oil Company (NOC) continued the assault on Iraqi worker rights by [fining and transferring](#) several workers, including Kirkuk Oil Union President Jamal Abdul Jabar, to remote locations hundreds of miles from their homes. Representatives of the union's parent federation, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), believe that the transfers are a disciplinary action against the workers for taking part in peaceful demonstrations to demand their rights. The Kirkuk Oil Union [issued a statement](#) in response.

In a May 11, 2011, letter to affiliates about the protest movements in the oil sector, the Oil Ministry's inspector general stated that "the freedom of expression and peaceful demonstration is a public right but not absolutely, as it is limited to the prevailing laws and regulations"—a reference to Iraq's Saddam-era labor law, which criminalizes strikes and actions "against the public good" that cause a decrease in production, especially in the energy sector.

On June 5, the General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GFWCUI) began a solidarity campaign for Jabar's reinstatement, criticizing the Oil Ministry as a repressive organization that has been hostile to trade union organizing. GFWCUI called on local and international union organizations to show solidarity with Jabar and demanded that the oil minister cancel the transfer order. The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) also publicly [supported](#) Jabar. The [International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions](#) (ICEM), which represents energy workers worldwide, and the [British Trades Union Congress](#) (TUC) condemned the government's actions, and a [LabourStart campaign](#) was launched. On June 10, a major demonstration was held in Kirkuk to protest NOC's actions.



Workers in Kirkuk demonstrate in support of Jamal Abdul Jabar.
Photo by GFIW

In a second case of forced transfer, Mahmood Majeed Al Mayahi, president of the GFIW-affiliated General Union of Oil Workers, was ordered from his workplace in the Oil Products Distribution Company to the Al Qaem region 275 miles away. While that order was not implemented, following worker protests and threat of strike action, a second move was threatened on April 24, before his case was transferred to the Board of Technical Affairs on May 10. GFIW oil workers met with national leaders of the federation and adopted recommendations, including a threat to strike when unionists are transferred or arrested.

Transfers have been a tactic used repeatedly by the Iraqi government against union activists. (See Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin, Volume 1, Issues [1](#) and [2](#).)

Join Us!

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



Worker and Trade Union Rights Violations

International Pressure Leads to Release of Union Activists

On May 25, 2011, Iraqi security forces arrested a group of workers demonstrating in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Trade unionist Jihad Jalil, a member of the Mechanic and Printing Workers Union, was detained without charge, along with three other demonstrators. GFIW [called](#) for their immediate release and asserted that all Iraqis have the right to participate in peaceful demonstrations.

Widespread international condemnation of these arrests, including from the [ICEM](#), [Amnesty International](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#) in addition to the [many voices](#) of unions and human rights groups inside Iraq, helped lead to the release of all four detainees on June 7.

Workplace Safety and Health Inadequate in Basra and Babylon Facilities, Says GFWCUI

GFWCUI reports that the health and safety system at the state company of mechanical industries in the town of Al Escandrya, Babylon governorate, which employs around 6,000 workers, is grossly inadequate and in violation of the law. GFWCUI states that the Safety Department is inactive and has no safety equipment, or funding to purchase it, and workplace accidents are frequent, especially in the plumbing, galvanizing, and sand departments. GFWCUI also claims that the employer does not provide training on safety procedures and does not conduct inspections. The clinic is inadequately staffed and has not conducted health checks since 2008. Breakrooms and eating facilities are unsatisfactory, according to the union.



Workers at the state company of mechanical industries in Babylon operate without health and safety equipment. Photo by GFWCUI

On June 18, 2011, FWCUI reported that the Iron & Steel facility, a 350-employee private company in Basra, was operating with no occupational safety and health measures. FWCUI stated that there is no safety department at the facility, no specialist staff, and no safety equipment, clinic, or first aid supplies. An attempted training program by the factory administration was derided by the workers for its lack of competency on safety matters.

Rights of Private-Sector Workers Also Violated

On April 29, 2011, GFWCUI reported that private-sector Banks of Baghdad and Al Warka'a had prevented unions from operating in their branches and threatened to lay off workers if they join the unions. These actions are in clear violation of International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions and trade union organizing rights under the law. GFWCUI has requested international support to overturn these violations.

Iraq One of Worst Countries to Be a Child, Says New UNICEF Ambassador

According to [newly appointed UNICEF Iraq Ambassador](#) and renowned singer Kadhum Al-Sahir, Iraq has gone from one of the best countries in the Middle East and North Africa to be a child to one of the worst, as a result of decades of war and neglect. Speaking in Baghdad on May 9, 2011, Al-Sahir said that around 35,000 infants die before reaching their first birthday, more than 1.5 million children under 5 are undernourished, around 700,000 are not enrolled in primary school, 2.5 million do not have access to safe water, 3.5 million lack adequate sanitation facilities, and around 800,000 5- to 14-year-olds are working. A full report is expected at the end of the year.

Union Leader Escapes Possible Assassination Attempt

GFWCUI President Sa'id Ni'ma [reports](#) that he survived a possible assassination attempt. On May 3, said Sa'id, three men in a vehicle followed him as he left work in Baghdad. Sa'id described this as the fourth such incident; in the previous one, unknown masked men had warned him to drop his case against the Mayor's office regarding the firing of industrial mechanics. The day after he was followed, Sa'id received a threatening telephone call from a person stating that an outside group, not workers, would determine who could be trade union leaders. GFWCUI condemned the attacks (see page 4), calling on authorities to investigate this incident and punish whoever was involved. GFWCUI stated that the intimidation was used to protect the interests of multinational capital, especially in the oil sector.

Huge Fines Imposed on Union Leaders for Strike Activity

The Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) announced that the Ministry of Oil had fined three trade union activists who took part in February and March 2010 demonstrations at the Southern Oil Company (SOC) in Basra. IFOU Vice President Ibrahim Radhi was fined 70 million Iraqi dinars (ID, about \$29,000). Ala'a Sabah Miri'e, IFOU executive board member and chairman of its central council, and Khez'al Kadhim, also an IFOU executive board member, received fines of 70 Million ID (about \$59,000)—far beyond the means of most Iraqi workers.

Following the strike, the unionists were [transferred](#) to another location but took their case to court and [won](#). The fines were imposed on their return. The Ministry of Oil also created a committee to investigate the strike's impact on production at the refinery. On May 19, the [union learned](#) that if the fines were not paid the union members would be jailed. On July 13, Ibrahim and his group were officially notified to appear in court. The first court session is scheduled for August 16.

Report Documents Human Rights Violations in Pro-Democracy Protests

Iraqi authorities must stop attacks on peaceful protesters calling for an end to unemployment, poor services, and corruption and demanding political reforms, says Amnesty International in an April 2011 report. Based on firsthand interviews with victims, witnesses, pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, and local government officials, "[Days of Rage: Protests and Repression in Iraq](#)" documents how Iraqi and Kurdish forces shot and killed protesters, including three teenage boys; threatened, detained, and tortured political activists; and targeted journalists covering the protests.

"The Iraqi authorities must end the use of intimidation and violence against those Iraqis peacefully calling for political and economic reforms," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Union Campaigns: Standing up for Workers in Iraq

Grain Workers in Basra Stand up for Their Rights

On April 1, led by GFWCUI in Basra, 300 workers at Umm Qasr Silo, an affiliate of the General Company for Grains Trade, rallied to call for the elimination of contracting out of work, improve job security through a self-funding company regulation, and demand long-overdue annual benefits as well as hazard and overtime allowances. Union leaders encouraged the workers to fight for their legitimate rights and to conduct elections and form a new union committee at the site. Demonstrators threatened to strike if management did not respond to their demands, which they have often raised on previous occasions. According to Abu Watan, vice president of GFWCUI in Basra, nearly all demands were met.



Workers demonstrate at Umm Qasr Silo in Basra. Photo by GFWCUI

Basra Oil Workers Call for Reform

On April 3, workers at the General Petrochemical Company in Basra demonstrated for internal company reform and the elimination of corporate corruption. FWCUI linked these issues to the daily violation of worker rights at the facility and the need for full freedom of association. Kareem Johi, president of the petrochemical workers union in Basra, gave a list of demands to company officials. A committee of activists was formed to follow up with the company administration and local government.

Workers Demand Oil Giant Honor Terms of Agreement

On April 14, GFWCUI and IFOU organized a protest at the Rumaila North oil field in Basra. Workers from IFOU, GFWCUI, and other unions with members at the facility protested violations committed by BP, the British multinational corporation, which, the workers report, broke the terms of a signed agreement. The unions assert that the company failed to pay monthly allowances, overtime hours, and shift differentials. Demonstrators gave management a 15-day deadline to comply. GFWCUI and IFOU have accused the company, which has a contract with the Iraqi government, of abusing worker rights and maximizing profits on the workers' backs.



Workers at the Southern Oil Company in Basra demonstrate the difference between permanent and temporary wages. Photo by GFWCUI

SOC Workers Demand Workplace Justice

On May 10, 2011, GFWCUI mobilized hundreds of workers at the SOC in Basra to protest management's neglect of their demands: to establish monitoring policies for multinational companies functioning in Iraq, especially ENI, an Italian oil conglomerate; to investigate managerial corruption; to pay the company's 2010 delayed interests of 21 billion ID (nearly \$18 million); to issue fixed-term contracts to temporary contract workers; and to improve health care for the company's staff, including conducting regular medical checkups and covering the cost of treatment for serious diseases.

GFWCUI Urges Boycott of Foreign Oil Companies

Following increased protests at SOC regarding foreign companies operating in Rumaila, Majnoon, and Wesat Qurna oil fields, GFWCUI presented a draft list of demands to the Oil Ministry. A statement distributed in the name of the temporary organizational committee urged workers to boycott the foreign companies till all demands were met. On May 17, the governor of Basra met with 25 worker representatives, the general director of SOC, and the manager of Al Rumaila. The delegation demanded increased insurance and worker benefits and profit sharing.



Commemorating May Day 2011

On May 1, 2011, the Iraqi labor movement commemorated International Labor Day by reaching out to the international labor community. More than 20 unions and NGOs signed a [statement](#) congratulating Iraqi workers from all sectors of the economy. The statement, to be disseminated widely, also listed a set of demands for fundamental rights and needs of Iraqi workers and unions. The main demands were the right to organize; a just and fair wage; safe and healthy working conditions; and the abolishment of all laws and procedures imposed by the former regime to suppress the labor movement, to be replaced with a new law in compliance with international labor standards.



Workers celebrate May Day in Basra.
Photo by GFWCUI

GFWCUI organized a large demonstration in Basra, where many trade union and civil society groups gathered to celebrate. Sami Hassan, secretary of the GFWCUI Basra branch, spoke about the historical roots of May Day. Many speakers condemned government attacks on trade unions in Iraq, in violation of international labor standards, and called for passage of the new labor law.

In Kurdish Iraq, the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) Sulaimaniyah branch [demanded](#) the issuance of a new labor law. Uthman Sa'ed, president of the construction workers union, presented awards to 120 workers who had demonstrated "outstanding performance in the reconstruction campaign of the Kurdistan region."

Industrial Workers in Ur Protest Corruption, Demand Bosses' Resignations

On April 20, 2011, workers at the Ur general industrial company held a demonstration, reports FWCUI. Accusing the administrative officer of corruption and irresponsible staff administration, the workers demanded his resignation, along with that of the security officer, who has aggressively accused many workers of being Ba'athists and terrorists. After the general manager failed to address these problems, the workers are now demanding his resignation as well.

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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

FWCUI Holds Open and Transparent Third Congress

FWCUI held its [Third Congress](#) on May 5-6, 2011. The Congress focused on defending trade union rights against government attempts to undermine trade unionism in Iraq, the poor conditions of work and life in the country, and celebrating the ongoing revolutions in the Arab world.

The Congress was an open and transparent event with delegates representing all geographical regions of Iraq, all major sectors, women, youth, and the unemployed. Research work for the Congress focused on freedom of association and trade union activities, working women, unemployment, the role of the federation nationally and internationally, organizing, and labor law. Each major sector organization also provided a report on the challenges unions are confronting at this level. Transparent trade union elections, free from government interference, were held, and new executive officers were duly elected.

Trade Unions Participate in "Tense" Economics Conference

On May 24-26, the International Labor Office, the United Nations Office of Project Services, and the World Bank co-sponsored an economics conference in Baghdad. The conference was part of a private-sector development project aimed at creating and implementing public policy in private-sector development. Representatives of the social partners were invited along with international experts, organizations, and agencies. Not all union organizations were invited to participate, even though the status of labor law, freedom of association, and social dialogue were key program elements.

Trade union delegates welcomed the opportunity to discuss these issues in detail, including the draft of the new labor code and the restructuring of state enterprises. GFIW reports, however, that the discussions were very tense, especially around economic reform. FWCUI argued that the labor law proposals were devoid of worker interest and the program promoted mass privatization. FWCUI President Falah Alwan [refused to sign](#) on to the [recommendations](#).

Mechanical Workers March

Thousands of mechanical workers, along with GFWCUI executive members and Babylon rank and file union members, marched in Iskandariya to demand their rights and denounce the recent activities of U.S. forces, including an assault on a watchman at a daycare center. The workers demanded an end to the interference of political parties into internal union governance and to the protection of corrupt supervisors. Marchers also condemned the threats to GFWCUI President Sa'id Ni'ma and linked them to the same political groups. In addition, the workers demanded safer working conditions and the payment of a hazard allowance.

This demonstration was organized after the latest threats to Sa'id for his attempts to defend his co-workers' rights and to fight against corruption.

Updates

Security Force Harassment Continues

On April 13, 2011, FWCUI announced that police and armed forces had again raided the FWCUI HQ office in Baghdad. According to FWCUI, security personnel were crude, rude, threatening, and intimidating. They arrested activist Firas Ali without a court order for participating in legal demonstrations. Security forces also broke into the office of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, located in the same building. Both offices had already been raided on March 21 ([Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin, First Quarter 2011, page 2](#)).

FWCUI leaders believe this repressive approach is designed to prevent activists from protesting for justice, better services, and decent working conditions. The union [demanded](#) release of the activists, respect for fundamental human rights, and an end to such brutal government actions.

Delay in Vote on New Labor Law Due to Contentious Paragraph

On June 1, 2011, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs [confirmed](#) that the cabinet had delayed voting on the new labor law because of an objection to a paragraph that says employees should be seen as workers—a remnant of the old regime's labor law. Minister of Labor Nassar Al-Rubaiee said the cabinet hoped to be able to vote but this paragraph, which denies the workers the right to organize trade unions in the public sector, remains the issue of contention. Some politicians still argue that trade unions can hinder ministerial work, a view that is contrary to the position of the Ministry of Labor. GFIW accused the Iraqi government of hindering the ratification of the new labor law since early 2007. The cabinet secretariat has confirmed that the new labor law is still in consultation status.

Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers

Global Labor Movement Demands Government Cease Interfering in Union Elections

The global labor movement expressed its concern over government interference in trade union elections and continued to support the unions of Iraq on this ongoing issue. In a [letter](#) to Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber wrote that he had “no faith whatsoever” that the Ministerial Preparatory Committee is capable of conducting free and fair trade union elections because of the political affiliations of the committee members and because they are acting in violation of ILO labor standards. The letter also stated the TUC's intention to exercise its veto right to block the government-nominated workers' delegate to the ILO's annual International Labor Conference in June.

A [LabourStart campaign](#) drew additional international support for the Iraqi labor movement. A campaign description called the Iraqi government's withdrawal of recognition of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) and its member unions (see page 6) a “highly politicized” attempt to take over union structures and to oversee elections. ICEM publicly supported the campaign. ICEM also [condemned](#) the takeover of union offices by political parties with support from police and military personnel and expressed the likelihood that upcoming union elections will be held inside the Sadrist Party offices.

International Labor Campaign Frees Union Activist

FWCUI reports that activist Alaa Nabil, who was detained by security authorities on March 21, 2011, for participating in the February 25 Day of Rage ([Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin, First Quarter 2011, page 2](#)) and formally arrested on April 4, was [released on April 16](#), following an international campaign on his behalf. The urgent action campaign [also targeted](#) Firas Ali, Haidar Shihab Ahmad Abdel Latif, and others arrested for participating in peaceful demonstrations.

May 1 Solidarity

On May 1, 2011, in recognition of International Labor Day, US Labor Against the War issued a [statement](#) of solidarity to the unions and workers of Iraq, joining in the struggle to respect worker rights and achieve basic dignity for working people everywhere.

“We salute the bravery and resolute action of the Iraqi working class as it seeks a democratic Iraq, free from all foreign intervention and control, free from repression and with full rights for workers as guaranteed by international labor standards,” said the statement. “Long live the Iraqi labor movement. Long live solidarity between our peoples.”

Iraq Trade Union Election: The Saga Continues

Pressure has been mounting ([Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin, First Quarter 2011, page 5](#)), both inside Iraq and through international efforts, to demand that the government cease and desist from interfering in trade union elections. Iraqi unions and international groups are demanding the passage of a new labor law in compliance with international labor standards to eliminate this kind of interference in unions' internal affairs.

In an April 1, 2011, [statement](#) to all Iraqi workers, GFIW emphasized the long delay in the trade union election process. On April 17, the MPC for the GFIW elections informed the general unions and local federations that GFIW and its executive board members have no standing to represent workers and that the MPC has the authority to form the trade union committees. The following day GFIW sent a formal letter to the state minister of NGO affairs that explained the violations and demanded that the MPC be abolished. On April 20, GFIW released another [statement](#), accusing the MPC of taking illegal actions against the federation.

Meanwhile, on April 6, GFWCUI [publicly criticized](#) the government's continued hostility toward unions since 2003, including the use of decrees and laws issued by the former regime that are antithetical to worker and trade union interests, as well as its failure to pass a labor law compliant with international standards. GFWCUI also called for independent trade unions free from partisanship, sectarianism, and nationalism (hard copy).

In response to the continued government interference, GFIW, GFWCUI, and FWCUI joined in an April 22 protest in Baghdad with the call for "No government interference in trade union affairs."

Yasin Aziz Ali, periodic president of KUWU, noted, "A few questions need to be answered before the trade union elections in Iraq [are held]. There is a legal gap. In order to have elections it is necessary to issue a new labor law and pension/social security laws. Elections in unions need to be free, independent, and transparent. This includes the government sector. KUWU supports trade union pluralism."

IFOU President Hassan Juma'a Awwad reported that an influential political group had told his union that they have no right to exist and if elections are held, the results will be based on political affiliations.

In early May, FWCUI reported that thousands of worker ID cards had been issued in many governorates as part of a campaign conducted by political parties, whose representatives promised the workers that they would be hired if they participated in the labor elections. This level of interference will affect unions' ability to build legitimate and democratic worker organizations.

On May 5, the Higher Ministerial Committee [postponed](#) the trade union elections but pledged that they would be held in accordance with trade union law 52/1987. The minister of labor has stated that he wants to implement consistent procedures across all trade union bodies and that all unions and federations should submit to the MPC regulations ratified by the cabinet to ensure transparent elections.



GFIW members rally in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. The banner reads: "No sovereignty for Iraq without national industry." Photo by GFIW