In an apparent effort to weaken Iraq's Basra-based Refinery Workers Union, the Iraqi government has transferred a number of prominent union leaders out of their jobs into new locations away from their homes and families.

On April 1, the government-owned Southern Oil Company transferred four leaders of Iraq's Basra-based Refinery Workers Union, including its president and vice-president. The transfers appeared to be a response to February and March demonstrations by refinery workers.

These peaceful demonstrations called for wage increases; fair payment of allowances owed employees from 2007, 2008, and 2009; permanent recruitment of temporary workers; monitoring of corruption; better local management; and official union recognition. In March, the Southern Oil Company had announced, through an internal memo acquired by workers, its intention to ban all job actions, such as strikes, demonstrations, and work stoppages, and to formally charge participants with breaking the law.

The transferred union leaders are President Ibrahim Radhi, who is also vice president of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU), the refinery union's parent federation; Vice President Ala's Sabah Miri'e, also president of the IFOU central council; Faraj Rbat Mizban, refinery union member, IFOU executive member, and media officer; and Khez'al Kadhim of the refinery union.

The company has since referred the four, along with eight other workers involved in sit-ins and demonstrations, to Oil Ministry headquarters in Baghdad for further investigation. Radhi, Miri'e, Mizban, and Kadhim have filed a lawsuit against the ministry for their reinstatement at the Basra Refinery.

(Continued on page 2)
Union Busting in Ministry of Industry

(PA1) Prominent union leader and worker rights activist Falah Alwan, president of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), was issued an order of transfer by his employer, the General Company for the Cotton Industries, in possible retaliation for leading industrial workers in a series of December 2009 protests. The workers were demonstrating for higher wages and improved working conditions in a peaceful assembly for which they had a permit.

Unions See Government/Private Employer Cooperation Behind Attempt to Ban Unions

In April, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) and the General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GFWCUI) reported examples of attempts to ban unions in private garages, possibly initiated by the Iraqi government. The Ministry of Transport reportedly has taken steps to bar trade unionists from entering these private sector worksites across Baghdad, even though they are allowed to do so under existing labor law, which still falls far short of international standards. In one instance, police barred union representatives from entering a garage, and in another the local garage owner (carrying out orders from the Ministry of Transport) took over the union offices at Al Alawi private transport station in Baghdad. GFIW has challenged the ministry orders in court, and the case is ongoing.

Oil Federation President Could Face Prison Term

The IFOU reports on a serious and developing situation in Basra. On March 1, IFOU President Hassan Juma’a was called to the investigation office of an independent legal body that serves under the office of the Prime Minister. The union identifies the charges as including actions considered criminal under Iraqi law: abusing the economy of Iraq by giving information and statements that concern foreign investments in the oil sector. Juma’a has been a well-known and outspoken critic of government oil policy for many years. He is out on bail, but the union reports that if he is convicted of the charges, he could be jailed for up to three years.

Union Recounts Government Interference in Elections

The Iraqi Teachers Union (ITU) reports that it has uncovered meddling and widespread voting irregularities in its January union elections by a “union election oversight committee” appointed by and entirely composed of government officials. The government committee attempted to replace ITU’s legitimate leadership with its own nominees, leading to a dangerous split in the union.
National Campaign for a Fair and Just Iraqi Labor Law

At the end of 2009, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), the Kurdistan General Workers Syndicate Union (KGWSU), and the Iraqi Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union (IKWSU) held press conferences in Basra, Baghdad, and Irbil to announce the launch of the National Campaign for a Fair and Just Iraqi Labour Law. The campaign is supported by the International Trade Union Confederation. So far, nearly 400 supporters have signed on, including 80 Iraqi Members of Parliament and many Iraqi unions. The coalition of unions, led by the GFIW, is conducting extensive outreach all over the country, including recent workshops attended by workers, NGO representatives, and reporters.

According to a GFIW spokesperson:

“Nearly seven years have passed since the fall of Saddam's regime, yet many of its laws continue to apply, making it impossible for Iraqi trade unions to organize and bargain on behalf of their members. Workers in the public sector can't join unions, the Government has frozen trade union assets, and key parts of Government have attempted to take over trade unions. These laws are undermining the immense contribution democratic and independent trade unions can make to Iraq's fledgling democracy.”

Attacks on Iraqi Oil Workers Draw Global Condemnation

In response to a call for support from Iraqi refinery workers, the AFL-CIO and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) cosponsored an April 14 demonstration in front of the Iraqi Consulate near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC.

Dozens of worker rights activists called on the Iraqi government to stop the harassment of Basra’s refinery workers and immediately replace old Saddam-era anti-union laws with democratic labor laws that guarantee Iraqi workers the right to freedom of association.

ICEM and AFL-CIO representatives also delivered letters to the Iraqi Embassy protesting the harassment of the refinery workers.

In addition:

- LabourStart launched an appeal to stop the harassment of oil union leaders.
- The British Trades Union Congress, the ICEM, the AFL-CIO, and the Solidarity Center all issued calls for solidarity with and support of Iraqi oil unions.
Sign the Petition to Support a New Labor Law for Iraq

The General Federation of Iraqi Workers, supported by the International Trade Union Confederation, launched an international appeal for a Fair and Just Iraqi Labour Law.

British and Iraqi Teachers Team up for Training

A delegation of Iraqi Teachers Union leaders recently traveled to the United Kingdom for two weeks of intensive union training and meetings with leaders of key U.K. teaching unions. The visit was sponsored by NASUWT, the British TUC affiliate that represents teachers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. With shadowy political figures trying to hijack their union, a chronic lack of teaching resources, and continued death threats, teachers in Iraq are under enormous strain, reports the TUC.

Building Union Power: Merger Close

The Iraqi Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union and the Kurdistan General Workers Syndicate Union have announced that they are close to finalizing a merger, a move that has been in the works for several years.

Other Updates

Please send feedback and information requests to::

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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.