

Iraq Trade Union Rights

Welcome to the Iraq Trade Union Rights Bulletin!

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“Day of Rage” Draws Tens of Thousands across Country

The wave of protests sweeping the Arab region has reached Iraq, provoking a violent reaction from the government.



Thousands of workers come out in protest on the “Day of Rage” in Sulaimaniyah. Photo by GFWCUI

On February 25, Iraqi citizens organized [major demonstrations](#) in 18 cities across 10 provinces to protest the lack of basic public services. Dubbed the “Day of Rage” after those in other parts of the region, the demonstrations reflect the lack of a functioning government. Workers and citizens demanded that the government actually run the state, improve electricity and food supplies, create new jobs, fight corruption, and end unnecessary posts and privileges for officials. Estimated crowd sizes varied from 3,000 in Baghdad up to 10,000 in Basra. Protesters’ slogans included: “The people’s oil is for the people, not for thieves”; “We want dignity, jobs, and services”; and “Sunnis and Shia, this homeland we shall never sell.”

In spite of the organizers’ call for peaceful demonstrations, protests turned violent in a number of locations as security police answered with force. Dozens of journalists covering the protests were detained. At least 29 people were killed, and numerous others were wounded.

The International Confederation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) [reported](#): “While the eyes of the world are on legitimate protests for democratic rights in several Arab countries, demonstrations last week in Iraq remind us that democracy—or even a government with functioning civil laws and institutions—is still not a reality.”

Amnesty International has published a [report](#) that calls on Iraqi authorities to stop intimidating and using lethal force against peaceful protesters demanding reforms, jobs, better services, and an end to corruption. Look for a full review in our next issue.

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



“Day of Dignity” Follows Day of Rage

One week after the Day of Rage, on March 4, a second demonstration was held across the country to peacefully protest the deaths that had ensued. In Basra the “Day of Dignity” protest was held despite government restrictions that imposed a 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. curfew on vehicles, as well as roadblocks on key arteries to the city center. People gathered at Al Za'yeem square in front of the main office of the local government amid a high security presence. Armed police forces surrounded local neighborhoods.

The General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (GFWCUI), the Iraq Freedom Congress, the Iraqi Labor Communist Party, and progressive student and youth associations participated in the demonstration. Many prominent labor leaders from Basra also were involved. After a moment of silence for those who had lost their lives in the Day of Rage, Abo Watan, vice president of GFWCUI-Basra Branch, addressed the crowd: “We are demonstrating here to demand electricity, drinking water, essential services, and political reforms as the occupation has failed to do that. We are demonstrating for real democracy, social freedoms, and worker rights. This crowd is independent of any political powers that have political aims in getting power. It is the will of common Iraqis.”

According to a GFWCUI statement, police and armed forces attacked the crowd and a number of journalists were assaulted.



Day of Dignity participants in Basra peacefully protest the deaths of at least 29 killed in the Day of Rage. Photo by GFWCUI

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Worker and Trade Union Rights Violations: Reports from Iraqi Unions

Police Raid Union Federation, Women's Freedom Organization Headquarters

On March 21, 2011, police raided the neighboring headquarters of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, which is dedicated to rebuilding Iraq on the basis of [secular democracy and human rights for all](#). Police officers had no court order or warrant, according to the union. Union officials who demanded an explanation were told that a group that had participated in demonstrations had met there.

On the same day, Alaa Nabil Saleh, who is a worker rights activist and was involved in the February 25 “Day of Rage” protests, was briefly detained. The union has provided details of both events to the authorities. It also has requested an investigation, condemned these provocative intrusions into trade union activities, and pledged to continue to defend workers' right to protest peacefully without recrimination.

GFIW Faults Government Inaction on Trade Union Rights

On February 13, a delegation from the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), led by Vice President Jabbar Taresh, briefed Deputy Prime Minister Nuri Shaways about the ongoing attacks on trade unions. Delegation members criticized what they call the federal government's blatant interference into internal union affairs and the continuous denial of union rights and freedoms by the central government of Iraq. They urged the speedy abolition of anti-union laws such as Decree 150 of 1987, which denies public-sector workers the right to organize, and faulted the government's delay in issuing a fair and just labor law in compliance with International Labor Organization (ILO) standards.

Shaways acknowledged the support of such a new law by international labor organizations and global trade unions and added that a proper labor law would benefit all Iraqis. He also supported GFIW demands for fair and independent trade union elections.

Three weeks later nothing had happened. On March 6, in the face of the ongoing delay, the GFIW conducted a national public protest in central Baghdad and other Iraqi cities to spotlight the need for jobs, worker rights, and better working and living conditions. The federation also released a [powerful statement](#) reinforcing this message.

Iraqi Union Campaigns: Standing up for Workers in Iraq

GFIW Members Mobilize around Labor Law and Working Conditions

On February 23, hundreds of workers representing the six major GFIW general unions in Baghdad, as well as other Iraqi unions and professional associations, gathered in the city's Tahrir square to demand freedom, social justice, an end to corruption, food rationing, better services, the reopening of major factories to reduce unemployment, and the issuance of a new labor law. Also participating was the National Labor Committee, established recently by the GFIW to educate and mobilize members and workers around the need to introduce the new labor law. Committee members chanted slogans calling for passage of the new labor law.



GFIW members carry a banner reading, "Issuing the new labor law is an urgent labor demand." Photo by GFIW

Sanitation Workers in Karbala Want Hiring Practices Cleaned up

On February 15, sanitation workers at Karbala Governorate rallied in front of the town hall to call for cancellation of a contract signed by the municipality with a Turkish firm to provide city cleanup services. This contract will lead to layoffs for about 3,000 sanitation workers. Hassan Jassem al-Nieimi, head of the municipal trade union committee at the Social Service Trade Union-GFIW, denounced the mass layoffs and said that the union is seeking job security language that would guarantee current employees' jobs with the new employer.

Oil Workers Rally to End Contract Labor

On February 10, Ministry of Oil contract workers demonstrated in Baghdad to demand tenure. They threatened to strike if their demands go unaddressed. More than 2,000 workers are contracted by the Ministry of Oil as day laborers with no social security, benefits, or guaranteed wages.

GFIW Mechanical Workers March for Their Rights

On February 14, hundreds of workers and mechanical workshop owners, members of the GFIW-affiliated General Union of Mechanical Workers, organized a major demonstration in Baghdad to demand workshop operation rights, salary increases, provision of new equipment and electricity to the workshops, and the need for an improved infrastructure including a sewage system. Local officials received detailed reports about conditions that are forcing workshops to close, creating more unemployment. Workshops are being transferred to residential areas, generating additional problems and pollution.

Basra Workers' Day of Action

On March 1, oil workers affiliated with GFWCUI and the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) gathered before the Drilling Company of Basra. Citing corruption, demonstrators demanded the resignation of the general manager and other officials and called for increased job security, including hiring local labor and full payment of benefits for 2010. They threatened to strike if management chose to ignore these warnings.

The workers were joined by hundreds of FWCUI-affiliated petrochemical workers, who demanded an investigation into corruption and administrative reform; an end to ongoing worker rights violations; and the freedom to organize, including the cessation of discipline proceedings against union leader Kareem Johi.

FWCUI Electricity Union Stages Sit-in

On February 13, workers employed by the southern electric power transfer unit—all members of the FWCUI-affiliated electricity union—conducted a sit-in to protest the ministry's reduction of their wages. The protest was prompted by a recent move by the ministry that reduced two steps on the salary scale and deducted a hazard allowance for dangerous work, such as climbing high-voltage electric power towers. Other workers joined the protest on February 14 before the general manager agreed to restore the salary scale.

Iraqi Union Campaigns: Standing up for Workers in Iraq

Leather and Textile Workers Strike over Wages and Benefits

The GFIW reports that leather and textile workers in three cities went on strike over wage and benefit issues. According to media coverage, on January 31, leather and garment industry workers at the General Company for Leather Goods in **Baghdad** [walked off the job](#), demanding payment of salaries that have been delayed for six weeks while the company was receiving regular orders from the Ministry of Defense and other agencies. The strike lasted two weeks. On February 20, a union delegation met with Minister of Industry Ahmed Al Karbooli to discuss worker issues at the company.

In early February, FWCUI [textile workers in Hilla](#) also struck over wage arrears. In addition, they demanded a raise in wages as low as 150,000-250,000 Iraqi dinars a month (about \$100-\$200), hazard allowances, and a shift of salaries to central financing rather than independent company funding. One striker said: "We are ready to demonstrate in the streets but not able to tolerate the hunger anymore." A union delegation met with Al Karbooli on February 20 to discuss the issues; the outcome is pending.

In **Kut**, on January 31, more than 7,000 textile workers shut down all operations in their factory over management's intention to reduce their retirement benefits. Management has promised to answer the workers' demands, but so far there are no official or written documents.

Kirkuk Cement Employees Demand Salary Increase

On March 30, employees of the Kirkuk Cement plant staged a demonstration to demand an increase in salaries and vocational allocations. The demonstrators threatened to hold a sit-in until their demands are met. In an [interview with Al Sumaria News](#), activist Basim Al Quraishi pointed out the hazardous work at this plant.

Union-Produced TV Programs Highlight Child Labor, Wage Issues

The media section of the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) [continues](#) to raise awareness of fundamental worker rights through its program, "Workers Affairs

TV," broadcast on Nilesat's Al Jamaheer satellite channel (see Volume 1, Issue 4, page 2). Episode 5, which aired on January 18, focused on the issue of child labor in Kurdistan, where more than 12,000 underage children work in violation of Law 71 of 1987 and international standards. Poverty forces these children to drop out of school and supplement the family income. All of the relevant laws that prohibit child labor were discussed.

Episode 6, which aired on January 22, specifically addressed wage issues, including public- and private-sector wage comparisons and the impact of inflation on reducing real wage levels. Workers interviewed for this segment expressed concern over rising prices and demanded more government action to reduce inflation.

FWCUI Basra Port Workers Protest Employment Policies, Corruption

On March 24, FWCUI led hundreds of state port company workers in a major protest in front of the building of the General company of Iraq ports. Waving flags and banners, protesters demanded the immediate reform of company policies to promote employment and an end to corruption in the port management structures. Colleagues from the electricity union also marched in solidarity with the port workers.

The union has developed a complex set of demands and has sent them to the Basra Governorate council and the minister of transport. The list includes a call to remove senior management, conduct an independent audit of all company accounts, ensure transparency in the spending of grants and awards, and honestly allocate staff land and housing. Demonstrators refused to negotiate with the company. The demands were handed to a local government representative.

The FWCUI issued a declaration condemning management corruption and company interference in the workers' right to protest.



Basra Port workers protest corruption. Photo by FWCUI

Updates

Still No Action in Legal Case against Oil Union Leaders

The Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) reports that the [court case](#) against Hassan Juma'a Awwad and Faleh Abboud Ammara, president and vice president of the IFOU, is still in primary investigation. Their lawyers report that the court has requested that the state-owned Southern Oil Company submit written documents of the statements allegedly made by the two union leaders. The company has denied that it has any such documents, and now the court is waiting for this response to be approved by the ministry and returned to court.

Unions Remain Wary of Government Interference in Trade Union Elections

Despite international attention and assurances from the Iraqi government that it will not interfere with [union elections](#), union leaders remain skeptical. On March 9, a senior GFIW delegation met with Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Nassar al-Rubaie, along with members of the Official Preparatory Committee set up by the government to supervise union elections. Delegation members urged al-Rubaie to allow the GFIW to hold independent and transparent elections free from interference and called on the Iraqi government to immediately adopt a labor law that adheres to international standards. Al-Rubaie stated that his ministry was ready to cooperate with the GFIW on both matters.

In a March 16 follow-up meeting with the Higher Committee of six ministers, the state minister for NGOs and other representatives confirmed the GFIW's legitimacy, and all agreed to proceed with the elections. However, further interference by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, [as reported by the FWCUI](#), has rendered the discussions moot. Union leaders still have grave misgivings about the union election process, which remains unresolved.

Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers

Iraqi Unions Show Regional Solidarity

Iraqi union members are standing strong with their Arab brothers and sisters. On January 31, FWCUI, GFWCUI, and IFOU sent letters of solidarity with the people and workers of Egypt, supporting them in their revolution and protests against the dictatorial regime and oppression of human and worker rights. In the spirit of global solidarity that is flooding across the region, trade union activists gathered in Basra on February 11 to support Egyptian workers' struggle. Over the quarter, Iraqi trade unions have sent similar letters of support to their compatriots in Bahrain, Yemen, and Tunisia.

In northern Iraq, hundreds of workers in the oil sector demonstrated in Kirkuk in solidarity and support of Tunisian and Egyptian peoples' struggle against decades of despotic and autocratic rule. The demonstrators, led by the Trade Union of Oil and Gas Workers at Kirkuk-KUWU, also demanded an end to day labor and the introduction of a work tenure system free from nepotism and based on merit, competence, and integrity. Of greatest import was the demand for the introduction of a new labor law compliant with international standards. The KUWU activity linked the international struggles with the situation facing Iraqi workers, thereby highlighting the importance of global trade union solidarity.



GFWCUI members show their support for their Egyptian brothers and sisters. Photo by GFWCUI

U.S. Labor Movement Concerned about State Interference in Iraqi Union Elections

In response to a request from the FWCUI, the AFL-CIO wrote to Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, expressing the federation's concern about government interference in internal trade union affairs, including union elections. The [February 25 letter](#) stated: "As a member of the ILO the government of Iraq has the obligation to respect the principles contained in the core labor standards that are designed to remove restrictions on trade union activists ... in the internal organization of their work."

Updates

Hundreds March for Politically Dismissed Workers in Baghdad

On January 4, more than 500 members of the FWCUI representing multiple ministries took to the streets of Baghdad on behalf of workers who had been [dismissed](#) during the Saddam regime for their political views, rehired, then had their pay cut drastically after they were unable to submit proof to a government Committee of Inquiry. The demonstrators had two main demands: first, to stop the procedures of the Committee of Inquiry and second, to consider the politically dismissed workers as full employees who should be paid accordingly.

The ICEM reported: “After trade union activists spoke at al-Ferdous Square, demonstrators carried a coffin as a death symbol to government officials destroying any semblance of global labor standards in this particular case.” TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers covered the demonstration and conducted interviews with a number of activists.

Following the demonstration, representatives of the politically dismissed workers entered into negotiations with the government, but so far no decisions have resulted, according to the union.



Union members carry a symbolic coffin in Baghdad protest. Photo by FWCUI

Global Solidarity with Iraqi Workers

Solidarity Forever! Iraqi Unions Stand Shoulder to Shoulder with U.S. Workers

In a tremendous burst of support, Iraqi trade unions sent a [series of solidarity letters](#) to the U.S. labor movement, unions in Wisconsin, and U.S. public-sector workers concerned about public-sector unions in Wisconsin and other U.S. states. Iraqi workers, who have faced anti-union tactics for decades, stand shoulder to shoulder with their U.S. counterparts.

Journalists Detained by Security Forces Freed after Online Protest Campaign

Four young journalists who had attended a protest demonstration in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square on March 7 vanished immediately afterward, [as reported by GFIW](#). They never arrived home and calls to their cell phones went unanswered. GFIW learned that the four had been detained by Iraqi security forces.

In response, US Labor Against the War (USLAW) coordinated an immediate electronic protest, asking activists to contact Iraqi authorities to demand the journalists’ immediate release and tell the Iraqi government to respect its citizens’ rights to peacefully protest, petition their government, and exercise their rights free of harassment, assault, and detention. Britain’s Trades Union Congress (TUC) also [sent a letter](#) to the Chargé d’Affaires at the Embassy of Iraq in London demanding the release of these four media workers as well as an end to the violent actions being taken by the government against journalists and demonstrators generally. Thanks to concerted action, the journalists were released.

GFIW International Representative Abdullah Muhsin [posted](#) from his London base: “Just wanted to let you know that the four young comrades were released March 10, 2011. ... Thank you and others for help in highlighting their plight.”