



Iraq oil workers in Basra rallied for delayed payments in March. Credit: GFWUI

Spurred by unpaid wages, reduced benefits and the prospect of massive layoffs if government services are privatized, public-sector workers in Iraq have taken to the streets across the nation in recent months, undeterred by police and security confrontations and the detention of union activists in Baghdad.

They also have righted egregious wrongs, including in the oil sector. After 17,000 workers threatened to strike at a major oil company in northern Iraq, workers received benefits they had been owed since 2013.

In this issue of the Bulletin, we look at how public employees are meeting the challenges of the increasingly precarious public sector as Iraqis' economic well-being erodes due to ongoing political and security issues.

Despite steep odds, Iraqi unions are strengthening the labor movement by coordinating efforts and campaigns, including pushing for passage of a new labor law and seeking justice for men and women who are working but not getting paid by “self-financing” companies that come under the purview of the Ministry of Industry but which are supposed to generate enough revenue to sustain themselves.

(The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, FWCUI, issued statement in [English](#) and [Arabic](#) on the struggles public employees face in Iraq.)



Ministry of Industry workers staged a series of rallies to demand unpaid wages. Credit: Wesam Chaseb

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## Ministry of Industry Workers

- Tens of thousands of workers at “self-financed” factories under the Ministry of Industry, who are demanding the government find a long-term solution and pay back and future wages, face a new crisis. The 2015 national budget, passed in January, threatens to transfer workers to the private sector, which would result in pay and benefit cuts, layoffs and forced retirement. ([See February 2015 Iraqi Trade Union Bulletin](#).)
- In January, at one of [many rallies](#), public employees [demanded](#) salary arrears be cleared. A delegation of workers met with the prime minister’s deputy and secretary general for ministries and governorates affairs, who promised action on the nonpayment of wages.
- The Council of Ministers issued Order 115 requiring all ministries and governorates to limit contract negotiations and take action against employees who participate in protests “that have not been permitted according to the law.” (Read the order in [English](#) and [Arabic](#).)
- Iraq’s public-sector workers have received support from the global labor movement, including: AFL-CIO ([English](#) and [Arabic](#)); Solidarity Center ([English](#) and [Arabic](#)); [IndustriALL](#); ITUC ([English](#) and [Arabic](#)); and USLAW ([English](#) and [Arabic](#)).

## Oil and Gas Workers

- In Kirkuk, workers affiliated to the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) announced in March they would strike on April 1 if the company did not pay benefits owed them since 2013. The company agreed, and paid all 17,000 on April 1 (agreement in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)).
- Hundreds of workers at an oil company in Basra [rallied](#) in March to protest a long delay in receiving profit-sharing, as required under Iraqi law. They also demanded the company permanently hire workers who are hired by the day.
- Also in Basra, gas-company workers gathered on April 14 to demand they receive their annual profit-sharing payment, following the lead of oil workers. (FWCUI statement in [English](#) and [Arabic](#).)

## Actions in Dhi Qar

- During an April 1 visit by the Minister of Health at a hospital in Nasiriyah, dozens of Health Department day workers [protested a possible reduction in wages](#) from \$127 a month to \$76 a month, and requested the government hire them as permanent staff. Some workers suffered minor injuries while trying to get away when the minister's security detail [shot in the air](#) to disperse the crowd, [a charge the Ministry denies](#). A Member of Parliament from the area defended the workers, and the Dhi Qar governorate council promised to work on raising their wages.
- Dhi Qar's police forces on March 28 detained Hashem Al Abadi, president of the local General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) branch, along with a union president of GFIW affiliate. The two reported they were detained for more than five hours without any official arrest orders. They say their arrest likely was related to the labor sit-in the federation organized to protest a construction company's decision to terminate 46 Iraqi workers without cause. The union believes the workers were fired for their union support. The security department released the two union leaders as workers protested their arrest, and issued an apology, assuring them that disciplinary actions were taken against the officers responsible.

## Protests in Muthanna

- Hundreds of public-sector workers in Muthanna who lost their jobs or had their salaries cut below the legal minimum wage held two protests and a strike in March, getting the attention of the vice governor, who promised to contact the Ministry of Health, which oversees the employees. (Read the workers' demands in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)). The rallies followed a GFIW workshop to develop an action plan to challenge the layoffs. Workers were not deterred after security forces blocked one protest.
- In an action organized by the GFIW in Muthanna, hundreds of workers and their allies, including members of the Sawa human rights organization, [marched to the Muthanna governorate building](#) March 25, demanding laid-off hospital

cleaning workers be returned to their jobs. Ali Jbari, president of the GFIW in Muthanna, decried government orders to eliminate 50 percent of the hospital workforce and reduce the minimum wage below 250,000 Iraqi dinar (\$250) per month, which he said violated the law. Member of Parliament Ali Lefteh Al Murshidi met with protestors and promised to find a solution. (See a [video of the rally.](#))

### Spotlight: Karbala Cement Plant Workers



Following a Solidarity Center workshop on worker rights, Karbala cement workers took action to win safety and health on the job and other rights at work. Credit: GFWUI

Some 350 workers at the Karbala cement plant signed a petition in April requesting representation in negotiations with management after the company refused a similar request by a group of workers in February. The workers signed the petition after months of outreach by their co-workers to educate them on their rights.

Although Iraq law prohibits workers from establishing a union because it is a public-sector enterprise, the plant receives International Finance Corp. (IFC) loans, and IFC labor standards require respect for freedom of association. Also in April, [cement workers staged a rally](#) to urge management to meet with a committee of workers to discuss improving safety and health conditions and other key issues. (See statement by General Federation of Iraqi Workers, GFWUI in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)).

The cement workers took action following two workshops covering worker rights that the GFWUI organized in cooperation with the Solidarity Center in January. Following the workshops, two official committees from the Ministry of the Environment and the National Committee on Occupational Safety and Health of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs visited the plant to inspect the workplace.



**Iraqi workers rally for a new labor law with the banner: "More than 10 years of change in Iraq and still the laws of the dictatorial (Saddam Hussein) regime hang on the necks of workers and their union organizations."**

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## Labor Legislation Update

The proposed labor law is expected to go before parliament for a vote in coming months. Iraqi unions have worked closely with the new parliamentary labor committee on the campaign for a new labor law compliant with International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions to replace the 1987 law. (See 2011 Iraq Trade Union Bulletin, third edition, in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)).

If passed, the labor law will include important improvements for Iraqi workers, such as first-ever legislation protecting women from sexual harassment in the workplace. It also would expand workplace protection against all forms of discrimination in pay, hiring, promotion and job duties. Further, the law would improve workers' right to bargain collectively and strike.

In February, Solidarity Center's Baghdad-based program manager met with the Iraq Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and Parliament's Labor and Social Affairs Committee to discuss how best to move forward the draft labor law version crafted by

the unions, the ILO and ITUC. Delegations from the GFWUI, the GFIW and the GFITU also met with the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and with Parliament's labor committee in March to advocate for the [union version of the labor law](#).

Solidarity Center and representatives from the General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (GFITU), the FWCUI, the GFWUI and the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) discussed the struggle for a fair labor code at the Iraqi Social Forum in March (details in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)). Several civil society organizations committed to work with the unions before the vote.

### **Attacks on Workers' Ability to Organize in the Electricity Sector**

With Iraq's electricity sector as an example, a new Solidarity Center report (in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)) illustrates why freedom of association for public-sector workers should be guaranteed in Iraq's trade union law. In 2007, the World Bank awarded the Iraqi government a \$124 million loan for reconstructing and rehabilitating the electricity sector.

During the loan period, the Iraqi government carried out [a campaign against electricity unions](#), after they publicized widespread corruption in the sector. As workers' ability to exercise their rights was stifled, so was the ability to raise concerns about the treatment of workers through a clear grievance mechanism, such as is guaranteed through IFC private-sector loans.

### **Iraqi Union Solidarity with U.S. Unions**

Just as representative organizations in the international labor community support their sisters and brothers in Iraq, Iraqi unions sent letters of solidarity to members of the United Steelworkers during their February strike.

- GFWUI letter in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)
- FWCUI letter in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)
- KUWU letter in [English](#) and [Arabic](#)
- Kurdish Occupational Safety and Health Organization letter in [English](#) and [Kurdish](#)

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