

Iraq Private-Sector Workers Make Key Gains



Iraqi workers celebrate May Day. Credit: GFITU

Iraq's private-sector unions are increasingly mobilizing and organizing workers, an essential move toward empowering workers struggling in the country's weak economy. The Solidarity Center, which has worked with Iraqi trade unions for more than a decade, has focused in recent years on assisting our trade union allies in strengthening their presence in the private sector.

Specifically, the Solidarity Center has trained Iraqi trade unions in promoting international labor standards at worksites, particularly with companies benefitting from International Finance Corp. (IFC) loans. The IFC requires clients who take loans to adhere to a set of [performance standards](#), including on labor and working conditions

and which require compliance with International Labor Organization (ILO) core labor rights. This campaign involves a small pool of employers who have taken loans from the IFC, yet has helped unions invoke international standards available to them and raise worker awareness about those rights.

In addition, Iraqi unions have significantly changed the way they help workers organize. Unions now approach workers and build a trade union committee as a foundation before seeking an election. In the past, Iraqi workers waited for management's approval to proceed with elections. This heightened degree of interaction has strengthened unions and helped build local-level organizational capacity.

Iraq's economic crisis, which has been exacerbated by the current conflicts and widespread internal displacement, will require substantial growth in the private sector to rebound. This growth must include the creation of decent jobs, which in turn leads to sustainable economic development. Building workers' economic strength also requires enforcement of labor laws. Many of Iraq's private-sector work is informal, in large part because labor laws are not enforced. Lawmakers also must respond to the mounting pressure from Iraqi unions to pass [proposed labor legislation](#) to bring Iraq's laws into compliance with ILO conventions.

This edition of the Iraq Trade Union Bulletin highlights union successes in the private sector, even in the face of strong employer resistance, interference and threats. Unions' new approaches to organizing and recruitment have succeeded across a broad range of industries, including communications, cement, water bottling and hospitality, and among dock workers in Basra's Umm Qasr port. We look forward to reporting future successes as unions expand their membership through this new organizing model.



Rallies across Iraq on International Labor Day 2015

Hundreds of union members marched in Baghdad, Basra and across Iraq on May 1,

rallying for passage of a labor law to improve working conditions in the private sector. They also called for expanded freedom of association through a new trade union law to allow all workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. Members of the General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (GFITU), the General Federation of Workers and Unions in Iraq (GFWUI), the Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU), and the Federation of Workers Councils and Union in Iraq (FWCUI) took part. Ministry of Industry employees for the first time joined a GFITU rally in Baghdad to demand their wages be paid on time.

- FWCUI statement: [Arabic](#) and [English](#)
- GFITU statement: [Arabic](#) and [English](#)
- GFWUI statement: [Arabic](#) and [English](#)
- The Kurdistan United Workers Union (KUWU) statement: [Kurdish](#) and [English](#)

Mobilizing Workers at Zain Telecom

As part of a campaign to educate workers about their right to receive social security benefits, the GFWUI Babylon branch is reaching out to workers at companies with Zain telecommunications contracts. Hundreds of workers are eligible to receive social security but have not registered, and GFWUI is helping workers register at the local social security office.

GFWUI organizers in Babylon also are expanding organizing efforts to reach workers at other telecommunications companies in the city. GFWUI leaders have created a preparatory committee for these telecom workers and is setting up the process to hold a union election.

The GFWUI has also been actively organizing workers at Zain telecom and companies it contracts with in Basra, mobilizing them around the need for proper safety gear and protection against harmful radiation from telecommunications towers. The employer does not cover medical expenses for workers injured or made ill because of their work. The union is highlighting incidences of safety and health hazards to the National Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (NCOSH) in Basra.

KUWU Expands Worker Rights

At the Bazian cement plant, the KUWU branch in Suleimaniya won formal union recognition and a series of other victories, including a process for grievance handling. The plant's parent company is funded, in part, by the IFC.

Over the past year, the KUWU branch and the trade union committee have expanded representation to 123 cement plant workers, out of some 550 workers at the Bazian cement plant and four other contracted companies, utilizing new organizing and mobilizing skills to achieve significant victories among private-sector workers.



Umm Qasr Transport Workers Stand Strong

Despite ongoing employer intimidation, transport workers at the Umm Qasr port have not been discouraged from joining a newly formed union at Gulftainer, with 43 workers becoming union members in recent months. The union, a GFIW affiliate, has discussed with company representatives how workers have a right to form unions under Iraqi law and under the conditions of the company's IFC loan.

In November 2014, some 119 workers [elected members to a union committee](#) to oversee union elections following a three-year organizing effort that involved raising awareness among workers about their rights on the job. Their victory has inspired workers at other companies in the port to begin organizing campaigns. More than 100 workers have joined GFIW from several companies, and GFIW is preparing to hold elections for three new trade union committees at port companies in coming months.

In their campaign to win union recognition from their employer, union members at Gulftainer also are engaging with the community, including the Basra Governorate Council and the Umm Qasr municipality council, by working to win their support. In addition, a delegation from NCOSH and the Solidarity Center met with the administrations of the Iraqi ports (SCIP) and the manager of Umm Qasr port to discuss the importance of job safety and health, and the legal responsibility of companies to abide by the law. The NCOSH team found the same violations that Solidarity Center staff had raised in 2011 and in 2014. NCOSH wrote to SCIP detailing the violations and their recommendations, which highlights how the union is improving its relationships with government agencies and pushing for greater enforcement of existing laws.

Erbil Rotana Hotel Workers Score Success

Nearly 200 workers at Erbil Rotana Hotel voted in May for trade union committee representatives in a KUWU election. The committee already has succeeded in getting

management to reinstate three workers who were unfairly dismissed and has secured employment contracts for workers who have been employed without one. Hotel workers say the committee has fostered more cooperation between them and management because the employer recognizes they must work with the committee, a legitimate representative of the workers.



Beverage Company Workers Join KUWU

Workers at the Al Ahrum Beverages Company joined KUWU in Duhok-Zakho in April, with 57 of the 63 eligible workers supporting the union. The workers also chose three representatives, who include two women, and the committee has already won additional meal breaks. The company owner, who agreed to provide an office for union meetings and the election, also has supported a first contract.

Oil Security Workers Protest Unfair Layoffs

Dozens of oil security workers employed by a contractor for a major oil firm rallied in May to demand reinstatement of 37 workers they say were laid off without notice before their contracts ended, a violation of Iraqi law. Talib Al Hasawneh, acting mayor of Zubair district in Basra, met with the protesting workers and also with representatives of the security company and announced the company had promised to reinstate all workers who had been laid off. However, to date, the [workers have not yet been reinstated](#).

1,200 Basra Iron and Steel Workers Protest Layoffs

Workers at an iron and steel factory in the Khor Al Zubair district that closed in March [protested at the Basra government building](#) to demand production be resumed and workers reinstated. The plant laid off all 1,200 workers due to a lack of scrap steel for production, transportation problems and insufficient electricity. After the GFIW in Basra launched a campaign to urge the company re-hire the workers, which included

meeting with Basra government representatives, the employer promised to solve this issue.



Contract Workers Win Back Full Wages

Dozens of daily contract workers at the electric power producing agency [marched in Basra in June](#) to protest a nearly 50 percent wage reduction, the electric power producing directorate issued a decision the day of the demonstration that indefinitely postponed the wage cut. The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) represents the workers' electricity union. [Watch a video of the rally.](#)

Migrant Workers Are Especially Vulnerable

The lack of labor rights enforcement in Iraq's private sector also means [migrant workers face abusive working conditions](#) such as excessive hours, low pay or delayed wages. Employers often take migrant workers' passports, and women migrant workers are frequently sexually harassed or assaulted. Although migrant workers travel to Iraq through recruitment agencies, they often do not receive proper work permits, which complicates their ability and willingness to seek help when subjected to abuse. It is estimated that [about 250 companies](#) specialize in recruiting migrant laborers while claiming to be tourist companies.

[More information here.](#)

Solidarity Center
888 16th Street NW, Suite 400 | Washington, DC 20006
| information@solidaritycenter.org
www.solidaritycenter.org | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)
Copyright© 2015 Solidarity Center
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Unsubscribe](#)