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Iraq's Oilworkers Will Defend the Country's Oil

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Description:

Two weeks after the occupying forces entered Basra on the 9th of April, 2003, Iraqi activists in the oil industry met to reestablish the union. We organized the workers for two reasons.

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Q: How was the Southern Oil Company Union organized?

A: Two weeks after the occupying forces entered Basra on the 9th of April, 2003, Iraqi activists in the oil industry met to reestablish the union. We organized the workers for two reasons. First, we had to deal with the administration put in place by the occupying forces. Second, we fear that the purpose of the occupation is to take control of the oil industry. Without organizing ourselves, we would be unable to protect our industry, which we have been looking after for generations. It was our duty as Iraqi workers to protect the oil installations since they are the property of the Iraqi people, and we are sure that the US and the international companies came here to put their hands on the country's oil reserves.

Although we're under British occupation, we've been able to establish the first union in the oil industry in the Bergeseeya district since the time of Saddam's terror. We've gone on to form unions in other areas in Basra and the southern part of the country. Now we have workers' councils in 23 areas of southern Iraq, and organized a small conference in Basra. We represent over 23,000 workers, and the oil enterprises in the south have about 90% of Iraq's oil reserves. It wasn't simple, or acceptable to the occupying forces, to organize a trade union for oil workers. They tried their best to stop us, because they saw this as a danger.

Q: Why didn't they want a union among oil workers?

A: Because they're aware that organized workers would have power, which they'd have to face. They'd have to recalculate the plans they made at the start of the occupation.

Q: What were the problems that the union had to overcome?

A: Workers haven't received what they should. The occupying forces issued Order #30 setting wages for workers in the public sector. According to this order, the salary of a worker would be 69,000 Iraqi dinars a month, the equivalent of about \$35. That salary was extremely low, while inflation and the cost of living are very high.

Iraqi oil reserves are the second largest in world. We asked ourselves, in a situation like that, how can it be that the workers in our industry would be getting a monthly salary of \$35? We found that the American administration wasn't willing to cooperate with us about the scale, so we decided to go on strike on the 13th of August. After a short strike, we managed to get the minimum salary up to 150,000 Iraqi dinars, or about \$100. This for us is the beginning of the struggle to improve the income of the oil workers. We were also able to get the American company KBR to withdraw its personnel from our installations completely.

Q: Did the authorities refuse to talk with the union because of the 1987 law, which prohibits unions in the public sector?

A: Yes. We had problems because they kept saying that according to the law we had no legitimacy - no right to represent workers in the oil sector. As far as we were concerned, we didn't need them to give us legitimacy, since we were elected by the workers. That's the only kind of legitimacy we need.

Q: How did you get the government to talk with you then?

A: It was the pressure of the strike that got the American administration to change its mind. In the end, they had no

alternative but to revise the salary scale. We managed to scrap the two bottom salary levels, which effectively doubled the wages of many workers.

The standard of living went up, even compared to Saddam Hussein's time. Now a worker with 20 years of experience, gets about 420,000 Iraqi dinars, or about 300 dollars. To give you an example, a chicken in the market would cost about 1500 dinars, or \$1.

Q: How do the members of the oil workers union look at the occupation?

A: From all the meetings we've had with workers all over the industry, we've heard from almost everyone that they want the occupation to end immediately, and the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from Iraq.

Q: Are you concerned about your security if the occupation ends immediately?

A: No, we are not worried. We don't have any problem with that because we are able to look after ourselves and our own security.

Q: If the occupation forces withdraw, isn't there a danger that there could be attacks on trade unionists by the insurgents, like those which have taken place in Baghdad?

A: That could happen, but we have to solve our problems ourselves.

Q: What kind of government do you want to see?

A: We want a government that will represent the national Iraqi movements. It should be friendly to all countries, especially those that stood against the war and occupation.

Q: What attitude did members have toward the January elections? Did many workers vote?

A: We didn't make any recommendation to them. It was up to each person whether they got involved or not. But there were large numbers of workers who did cast ballots. I believe about 80% of the workers voted. They voted for a number of different parties, sometimes depending on their level of education, or what each individual wanted.

Q: How might it be possible for a popularly-chosen government to come into power in Iraq?

A: I don't believe there will be any big developments in the next six months. Any government chosen in the elections will have a lot of problems to sort out. They'll have to write a new constitution, and the laws of Saddam Hussein will have to be abolished.

The next government should not only ensure the security of the Iraqi people, but also oppose the privatization of industry. We oppose privatization very strongly, especially in the oil industry. It is our industry. We don't want a new colonization under the guise of privatization, with international companies taking control of the oil.

The day will come when the occupation forces leave. The US timetable foresees the formation of an Iraqi government after the elections. The US should then leave, but I don't have faith that they will leave so easily. We

should all come together to resist the occupation.

Q: What kind of support do you want from unions in the US?

A: We have gone through 35 years of Saddam's terror, so we need lots of support from workers in the US. We especially need training in organizing our union, since we don't have much experience in doing that. We also need support from American union in opposing privatization. You are aware of what globalization brings to the workers of the third world. Our union is a young one, and we need training, especially from unions who are opposed to the war.

Q: How do you see the armed resistance to the occupation?

A: We support all types of honorable struggle in Iraq, and we want the occupation to end immediately. But we are against acts of terrorism against Iraqi civilians, from certain terrorist organizations in Iraq. We do not support that. We oppose it as much as we oppose the occupation. If the occupying forces are withdrawn, we are capable of building a new democracy, one that will represent the interests of the Iraqi people, and not the US.

Q: What are your relationships with other unions in Basra?

A: We have very good relations with the other trade unions in Basra. Our struggle is one struggle, and we have to unite against the occupation. The Southern Oil Company Union is an independent union. We haven't made any decision about which union federation we will join, until we find out which represents the interest of our industry's workers. We have very good relations with all three federations, and in the future we will cooperate with them in the interests of our workers.

One federation is headed by Rasim Al Awad, the second is led by Jabbar Tarish, and the third is headed by Felah Alwan. One represents the Iraqi Communist Party, Allawi's Party and one of the nationalist parties. The second one is more of an independent but includes some representatives of the religious movements. Two of its leaders are members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The third federation represents the Workers' Communist Party. We're still looking to see which ones, at the end of the day, are the legitimate ones representing the interests of the workers. There are many unions not affiliated with any federation. We had members who voted for all these political parties. To us, they're all OK except the Baathists.

Today, Iraqi civil society believes in pluralism. Some say, therefore, that the previous Baathist unions should be free to operate. This might lead to the return of the Baathist regime, so I believe therefore that we should restrict pluralism, that pluralism is not a good idea.

The coming struggle against privatization is more important than the struggle against the occupation, since the US is seeking to privatize all sectors of the Iraqi economy. The positions of Iraqi unions on this issue could be different. If only one union gets legitimacy from the Iraqi state, this could be a problem. The Baathist unions worked for government policy, and in this new situation, officially legitimate unions might also. This is another reason why pluralism may not serve Iraqi society.

Q: What is the situation of the longshore workers in the port of Um Qasr?

A: Dock workers in Um Qasr are facing lots of problems. The administration of the port is not Iraqi - it was given to Stevedoring Services of America. Last month there was yet another problem between the administration and the workers, who weren't being treated fairly. They have a union, called the Union of the Port Industry, headed Nadam

Radhi. The local Iraqi managers, and especially the US company, refuse to recognize it. If the management paid workers a decent wage, there wouldn't be a problem. I went to Um Qasr with Abu Lina, the head of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions in Basra, to negotiate with the administration, and Abu Lina took a letter from Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, and gave it to the union there.

Q: Tell us a little about your own history.

A: I've worked in the Southern Oil Company for 33 years, as a technician. I was one of many people opposed to Saddam Hussein. I helped to organize against the regime in secret, and was involved in the uprising of 1991. We wanted independence, and didn't belong any political party. I became president of the union after the occupation started. I had the support of other activists because I'd already been speaking out for workers' rights. I was elected President in the Basra area in a democratic and free election, and then elected president of the whole union in our first congress.

Q: Are there attacks on unions in the Basra area?

A: Yes, the attacks on trade unions in Basra are similar to those happening in the rest of Iraq. We recently had an attack on an electrical power worker by the administration of the plant.

I expect an attack on me will take place, but I'm not afraid. I expect the terrorists will strike everywhere. Several of our sections in Basra have already been targets. They target both workers and machinery, although no oil workers have been killed yet. There were 3 or 4 workers killed trying to put out the fires, though, which were started by the bombs. When Hadi Saleh [international secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions] was murdered in Baghdad, I thought the old Mukhabharat [Saddam's former secret police] could have been responsible. They seem to be able to operate freely.

PS:

*David Bacon is a California photojournalist, who documents labor, migration and globalization. His book, *The Children of NAFTA: Labor Wars on the US/Mexico Border*, was published last year by University of California Press.*

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