

Trades Union Congress



TUC conference on solidarity with Iraqi workers

Unions in Iraq: what British unions can do to help

Report of a conference held on Monday, 14 February 2005 in Congress House.

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Summary

The TUC held a conference on 14 February 2005 which brought the British trade union movement into direct contact with a wide range of trade unionists from Iraq. There were representatives of the Kurdish trade unions, sectoral unions in journalism, oil and teaching, and rival national confederations from Iraq. The situation they described was as chaotic and uncertain as the state of trade unionism that their diversity graphically portrayed. Several British trade unionists complained that the spread of representation was confusing – because that’s one facet of the reality of trade unionism in Iraq.

Out of the chaos and uncertainty of Iraq and Kurdistan themselves, trade unions are seeking to bring sanity and security – financial as well as physical. And that’s the task which the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee which organised the conference now has before it as well. Based on the views expressed by the Iraqi trade unionists at the conference (and in the many other for a where their views have been heard) and the responses of the British trade unionists present, the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee is drawing up an ambitious work programme for the next eighteen months (a rough draft was circulated to conference participants and is reproduced at the end of this report).

The main conclusion of the conference was that Iraqi and Kurdish trade unionists need our support and our help – and our money! – to recreate one of the most vibrant trade union movements ever to come out of the Middle East. We owe it to them to help them rebuild and renew their movement.

Thanks to Salema Gulbahar for her work on this report, and to all those who made the conference happen – in particular our brave Iraqi colleagues.

Iraq – the current situation

Sue Rogers, National Treasurer of the NASUWT and Chair of the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee

Colleagues, I welcome you here today to the TUC. This is a very important conference about a very important issue, and I am glad that so many people from so many unions – certainly all the TUC’s major affiliates – could attend today.

I am also particularly glad that so many of our colleagues from Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan have been able to attend, as that is very important to us – they are the reason we are meeting here today, and they are truly welcome.

This conference is about building practical solidarity with Iraqi and Kurdish trade unions, and by the end of the day, we want you to leave here informed about what is going on in Iraqi trade unionism and in Iraqi workplaces, and enthused with ideas about what you and your union can do.

This morning we will concentrate on the first part of that, because people will want to hear from our Iraqi colleagues and others about the situation. Because we have managed to assemble so many trade unionists from Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, it would take too long to hear from them all in plenary, so we have arranged a series of workshops before lunch. Each workshop will have at least two Iraqi or Kurdish trade unionists, and we hope you will have the chance to ask them questions and find out a lot more about the situation in Iraq.

In the afternoon workshops you will find out what trade unionists from Britain and around the world are doing, and then discuss among yourselves what more you can do.

Because of my background – I spent some of my childhood in Kirkuk in the north of Iraq – I am particularly keen that as well as talking about Iraqi trade unions, we talk also about Iraqi Kurdistan, which is a rather different place politically, not

least because it was in practice out of Saddam's control for a decade before the latest war.

Walid Hamdan, International Labour Organisation

Thank you very much for having invited me to this conference in solidarity with the workers of Iraq.

Many people in the Arab region still believe that we must rely on governments to bring about change. It is now apparent that the most important changes can only be brought about by ourselves: the people. In strong, independent, democratic trade unions, lies the essential force to effect change in Iraq, in the Arab region and in the world.

The Iraqi trade union movement, with the support of the international trade union movement, has an opportunity to use the clear international consensus to promote the active participation of Iraqi workers in shaping a free and united Iraq. An Iraq where no one is marginalised on the basis of race, religion or political views. An Iraq that can avoid the ugly risks of internal religious or ethnic conflicts that are so profoundly damaging to the dreams of ordinary Iraqi people.

Of course, your active participation in the economic and social debate will largely depend on your political will for real changes, and the strategies and structures you put in place to deal with them. But without a democratic and independent trade union movement, the Iraq we all envision will be unattainable.

However, in Iraq, we should keep in mind that we are dealing with a situation that has been described as 'tough and lethal'. We are dealing with a society that is fighting against both old and new tyrannies; against brutal and inhuman practices that actively aim to kill the hope of all those who dare to believe in a better future for Iraq. It is still fighting against poverty, unemployment, exclusion, reduced social protection and diminished sovereignty and respect for human rights.

And let's not forget that many Iraqis still fight what they consider to be the continued occupation of their country, and the concomitant impediment to security, prosperity and progress. One recent UNDP Report on Human Development states that development, "is the process of expanding

choices...nothing hinders development more than subjecting a people to foreign occupation.”

Workers in Iraq are in a weak position; levels of union membership remain low; styles of management need to be revisited; union impact on public policies remain undetectable; and if independence is to be promoted and fortified, the nature of political alliances and allegiances need to be thoroughly reassessed.

Trade unions are essential to democratic stability; they are vehicles not only for expressing, but also structuring workers’ concerns. Labour weakness in the initial stages of democratisation may have profound political implications. Some sociologists conjecture that without unions, workers’ anger can be particularly open to mobilisation by extremist agendas.

We must endeavour to build the capacity of unions in Iraq so workers are not left on the sidelines, watching passively as new elites restructure the national economy in line with fashionable neo-liberal trends, which threaten regulation, participation and equality. We must support them to counter attempts to make them ineffective and marginalised.

We at the ILO are committed to providing every assistance to the workers of Iraq. We are ready to join forces with the TUC, the ICFTU, the Solidarity Center, and the free international union movement in a consolidated effort to help the Iraqi workers build independent and democratic unions that are capable of taking up their role as a democratic force. We are ready to provide assistance in:

- developing and promoting mechanisms essential for the efficiency for social dialogue and industrial relations;
- organising weak spots: agriculture, the informal sector, women; and
- improving workers’ education and skills capacities to enhance participation in economic and social debate.

Iraq is changing; let’s help our Iraqi brothers and sisters take a lead in building the new democratic Iraq - where security concerns are not limited to policing and armies, but extended to the security from deprivation, from poverty, from marginalisation; for the rule of law and the upholding of human rights. Without these securities, we increase the risk of something that has been especially clear

since September 11, a form of extremism and fundamentalist clashes that knows no borders.

Amaya Fernandez, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)

We welcome the initiative taken by the TUC to organise an Iraq Solidarity Committee and we are pleased to participate as observers. This will give us the opportunity to closely follow all initiatives and coordinate common actions.

The ICFTU has closely followed all developments in Iraq, denouncing from the very beginning the military intervention without a clear mandate of the UN Security Council.

We have pressured the coalition forces and the interim government to ensure labour issues are fully taken into consideration in the reconstruction process and are consistent with international labour standards. We insisted on the involvement of the ILO. We fully believe that the development of trade unionism in Iraq will contribute to the reconstruction of a stable and democratic society.

The first meeting between the ICFTU, its affiliates, the Global Union Federations (GUFs) and Iraqi unionists took place in Jordan in December 2003, facilitated by the ILO. Iraqi representatives consisted of:

- The General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (GFITU)
- The Iraq Kurdish National Union (linked to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan)
- The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)
- The Union of the Unemployed

A subsequent fact finding mission to Iraq in February 2004 explored realistic possibilities for collaboration with Iraqi trade unions and raised concerns about the reconstruction process with officials of the Coalition Provisional Authority and Iraq's Governing Council.

After having assessed the situation faced by Iraqi workers and trade unionists, the ICFTU has firmly committed to:

- assisting Iraqi workers to build independent and democratic trade unions

- influencing the process of reconstruction to ensure the full respect of the “will of the Iraqi people, the interests of working people, and international labour standards.”

The ICFTU is currently running an awareness raising campaign among Iraqi workers about international core labour rights, namely those embodied in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at work.

In October 2004, we organised a seminar to examine the draft Iraqi labour code and its conformity to international labour standards. For many of the Iraqi participants, this was their introduction to the functions of the ILO and indeed to the draft Iraqi labour code.

Participants exchanged information, associated with GUF members as well as Iraqi counterparts and attended workshops dedicated to specific sectors.

Workshops held just last week [February 2005] covered topics related to fundamental trade unions rights and organisation.

The event was organised in close collaboration with four GUFs: the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW), Public Services International (PSI) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF). Their regional representatives acted as facilitators.

The 20 Iraqi delegates were divided into working groups by sectors. This training round served as a pilot workshop – and through a participatory approach, the Iraqis themselves identified the issues of most concern to them, and ways to overcome them.

Their main concerns related to:

- foreign occupation as the main cause of the present unstable situation and a resulting increased rate of unemployment: 60-70%, due to energy cuts, factory closures, privatisation, lack of investment, and cheap imports;
- the adoption of a new Iraqi labour code in accordance with international labour standards and with the full participation of trade unions in the drafting

process;

- gender discrimination: Iraqi women demand more opportunities to work and more active participation in trade unions; and
- the lack of financial and technological capacity.

Outcomes of the workshops:

- a clearer understanding of the position and needs of workers;
- delegates agreed to overcome their own internal and organisational divisions and to work together to protect their common rights;
- some participants proposed to gather all federations into a unique group. But it was decided that a plurality of trade unions in the present political situation would preserve independence from government;
- we decided that working by sectors, independent of the hierarchy of the various federations, would actually enhance cohesion; and
- delegates requested our support to pressure the government to implement international labour standards, to provide financial assistance and to share expertise through further training and seminars.

An Arab Regional Trade Union Conference was held immediately after the training workshop. It gathered Arab unionists including Iraqis, together with the ICFTU, the ILO, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the European Union.

Special attention was given to Iraq and representatives of the main Iraqi trade unions were invited to present the latest developments and union actions in Iraq.

Various experts briefed the participants on the main international mechanisms to enforce international labour standards. Participants discussed obstacles at different levels and ways to implement recommended practices.

We will publish a final report including interventions and outcomes which will be disseminated via the electronic bulletin on Iraqi trade unions. This bulletin aims to exchange information on trade union actions and social and economic development issues. All delegates here today are invited to contribute.

The current project will end by next month, March 2005. But ICFTU's support to Iraqi trade unions will continue through a new project that will build on the

lessons learnt. This future project will implement capacity building through training workshops, facilitated by the GUFs.

These workshops will be accompanied by an awareness raising campaign on core labour standards amongst Iraqi workers and help them lobby government for the adoption of the Iraqi Labour Code.

Finally, we plan to hold a national conference at the end of the project to provide a forum for analysis and discussion on current developments, namely privatisation and the implementation of the Iraqi Labour Code.

In principle, we would like to implement all activities in Iraq provided that the present situation becomes stabilised. We are also considering the possibility of conducting further workshops in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The ICFTU calls on the Iraqi government to respect core labour standards. We call on the Iraqi government to recognise the principle of freedom of association. Freedom of association must be encouraged to enable social participation and consultation with trade unions in the reconstruction process.

The Iraqi trade union movement has an indisputable role to play in ensuring that economic progress benefits the whole of Iraqi society and it is not achieved through detriment to workers.

The first step in this direction should be the adoption of a new Iraqi labour code in full respect with the international labour standards and in consultation with Trade Unions.

Internal political divisions weaken the Iraqi trade unions movement and all trade unions must work together to defend the interests and rights of workers.

Harry Barnes MP, Labour Friends of Iraq Joint President

Everyone here is interested in assisting Iraqi unions but there are many in the labour movement who don't even know that there are trade unions in Iraq. We have to get this message across and increase action in their support.

Everyone here knows their history from how the Labour Representation Committee was formed when initially only two Labour MPs were elected, the Taff Vale and Osborne judgements against the trade unions and so on.

The Iraqi movement also has its history from organising the docks and oil industry after the First World War to the organisation of intellectual forces such as doctors and teachers, to the overthrow of the feudal monarchical system in 1958 by the Free Officers' Movement with popular support.

Iraq was influenced by the UK until the Baghdad Pact in 1955. I was a soldier on national service in Basra in 1955/6. Back then a million people marched on the May Day march in 1959 out of a population of about 14 million people.

But then there was a series of coups and counter-coups which led to Saddam's totalitarian state and his controlled yellow unions. Public sector unions were banned and union leaders were tortured and murdered. Clandestine networks were established. They opposed the war and thought there were internally based alternatives. It is better for people themselves in struggle to create their own futures.

The Ba'athist laws continue. Trade unions in the public sector are technically illegal and there is a need for new laws to allow trade union activity. But freedom of organisation and association are threatened by terrorists as we saw with the terrible murder of Hadi Saleh.

The unions also face the problem of rip-off capitalism being imposed as it was in Russia after the fall of communism. The unions need training in industrial relations as well as computers and mobiles.

The elections present the beginnings of real possibilities for change with, in relation to the foreign troops, Iraq and its Parliament defining what they want. But democracy is more than voting; it is about the rights of unions, women, youth and ex-prisoners groups to speak out. As groups will for better schools and hospitals.

We have set up Labour Friends of Iraq to help provide solidarity with such groups as they take control over their own lives. And change in Iraq can lead to change in the whole of the Middle East.

Workshops on Iraqi trade unions

Eight Iraqi trade unionists addressed the conference and led the first three workshops; they described the current situation in Iraq and called for solidarity and support from British trade unions to rebuild the Iraqi trade union movement. They highlighted their needs in terms of financial support, training for union representatives and leaders, and advice on recruitment, tackling unemployment and privatisation.

The Iraqi trade unionists were:

- Hangaw Abdulla Khan - President of Kurdish Union Federation
- Ali Shari Ali - Iraq Teachers' Union
- Zuhair al-Jazairy - Journalists' Union and Editor of Al Mahda newspaper
- Falah Alwan - President of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions of Iraq
- Jabar Faris - General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions
- Hassan Jumaa al Jawad - President of the Basra Oil Workers Union
- Ghasib Hassan - President of the Railway and Aviation Union (IFTU)

Workshop 1

Hangaw Abdulla Khan, President of Kurdish Union Federation

An initial background on the trade union movement in Kurdistan and the areas of operation was given. There are six trade unions in Iraqi Kurdistan affiliated to the Federation covering transport, construction and other trades. Membership stands at 100,000 (card holders). All the Federation's revenue is generated from membership fees.

In 1991, two sanctions were imposed on Kurdistan: one by the UN alongside the creation of a 'safe haven' and a second sanction was introduced by Saddam because of the UN safe haven. During this period, villages were destroyed, causing a mass exodus of young people.

In 1992 a regional government was granted to the area. The Federation formed openly and was able to operate without interference. Civil society organisations were established free from state intervention.

Khan appealed to trade unionists in Britain to support the movement in Iraq Kurdistan. He made an open invitation to British colleagues to see the achievements that have been made in recent times. He said the region was safe for people to visit and encouraged people to come as tourists, as investment was badly needed and unemployment was high. He conveyed special thanks to the Fire Brigades Union for the donations that they made. He said the money had been distributed to the five governance areas to assist in building capacity.

What is needed?

- assistance for reconstruction: trade union buildings are still shells; in addition to buildings, equipment and furniture are needed, especially computers, cars and faxes;
- a cultural and training centre; and
- training in Iraq/Kurdistan and abroad.

Ali Shari Ali, Iraq Teachers' Union

Ali stressed that his union was non-political and boasted 400,000 members, 75,000 in Baghdad. The union had shed its Ba'athist association post-Saddam. A primary committee was formed on 1 May 2003 with 2 branches in Baghdad. Ali recognised that women had a pivotal part to play in the reconstruction of Iraq as they made up a third of the Teachers' Union membership.

In July 2003 a conference resulted in media coverage and a marketing drive for increasing union operations – it included producing union booklets, issuing a monthly newspaper, organising art exhibitions and the active sharing of festivals (at the National Theatre in Baghdad and on International Children's Day).

This was a huge success - people who had been expelled from the union or had left through fear began returning; 30,000 teachers have returned to their jobs.

British colleagues were invited to visit schools and institutions in Iraq to see how reconstruction was progressing.

Tens of acres of land that was previously used by the military and security forces are now being used to build houses for teachers and their families. The following are also priorities:

- subsidised IT courses;
- trade union conferences;
- a modern education system;
- abolition of corporal punishment; and
- a focus on children's rights.

What is needed?

- the reconstruction of buildings is paramount in getting unions back on their feet;
- training in trade union activities;
- sponsorship by the British government for trade unionists to take higher degrees;
- sponsorship and assistance to create a cultural centre in Kurdistan;
- colleges and academics here to get involved in sponsorship;
- modern education courses, that can be web-based and available online;
- introduction of citizenship and human rights as subject areas in the core curriculum; and
- a conference and workshops on human rights, organised by the Ministry of Culture.

The general election was referred to as the 'scent of democracy and liberty'.

The 1987 law banning trade unions should be repealed and a new labour code should be established.

Attacks by extremists were seen as an obstacle to organising as many were afraid to join trade unions or attend meeting because of intimidation.

Extremists were feeding on unemployment so it is imperative that employment is seen as a priority.

Questions and comments from delegates

It was noted that the Teachers' Union had been a front organisation for Saddam and wondered what changes had occurred. Ali responded that the union had collapsed with the regime and everything stolen or destroyed. The union had begun completely anew with voluntary help from members. The old regime had gone and with it the corruption. The Teachers' Union was looking forward and recruiting for a free, multicultural organisation.

A question was asked about unity. The movement was being built across Iraq and embraced all cities and all workers. Organising in Kurdistan was not only for Kurds. The movement supported pluralism so people were free to join any trade union.

It was noted that language would be a barrier to providing direct training.

One delegate asked when the new draft labour code might be passed. He was told that it was going to be put to the incoming assembly for ratification. The Federation had problems with some articles and these reservations would be put to the ICFTU and ILO.

One person who had spent time in Iraq on active duty during the Gulf War said he was pleased with the statistics on the increase in teacher and student numbers since 1993. He aimed to visit Iraq to observe developments as well as to enjoy the 'wonderful' tourist opportunities!

Workshop 2

Zuhair Al-Jazairy, Iraqi Journalists' Union

Newspapers are obviously very important in any society, but probably more so for Iraq in its current position. Pre-occupation there was only one newspaper – Ba'athist propaganda – but now there are approximately 115 newspapers. The public is not used to so much choice and are not sure what to trust.

Most old-wave journalists have returned from exile; they come mainly from intellectual/literary backgrounds. Many were trained in the propaganda-era and are not used to challenging authority. They were exiled in 3 waves, firstly during the Ba'athification of Iraq, later during Iran-Iraq War and finally during the UN Sanctions. On the other side, most new-wave journalists have very little experience of journalism. But they are a new generation, with a different culture.

Global media companies pose major problems because they can and do employ Iraqi media personnel to report for them for far greater pay than local newspapers. This is dangerous work, in a time of transition.

There is a 'hidden militia', i.e. tribal and religious groups that target newspapers and staff. Correspondents and journalists must avoid being targeted and kidnapped. For this reason one needs to temper language when writing about these groups. Companies, when criticised, can hire militias to target media personnel. There is also a threat from the US military, if you are seen as anti-Iraqi-journalists. Journalists have been shot by US snipers, dubbed 'unknown killers' and no investigations take place.

Theoretically journalists are now free to criticise the current authorities, the US military and Iraqi Government, but there is no guarantee of this freedom as it could be withdrawn at any time as this right is not protected by law.

At military press conferences, journalists who are not sympathetic to authorities have been accused of 'encouraging violence'. But there is a fine line between freedom and responsibility. There is a responsibility not to inflame hostilities with an armed population - careless reporting could create large-scale internal conflict.

There can be no free and independent trade unions without free and independent media and there is no guarantee of this - "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."

Journalism is still considered a good profession, especially for women. Female journalists (wearing headscarves) have been sent to Fallujah safely as they have sensitivity and are treated respectfully by militias.

Broadcast journalists used to also be covered by this union, but they will probably be separate in the future

There was a change of leadership after discovery of financial corruption and of government involvement in the selection of new committee members. The present government does not have experience of labour relations and there is currently no mechanism or structure to lobby government with. We need to be deciding for ourselves how we want the union to develop.

Falah Alwan, President of the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions of Iraq

The Federation was formed in 2003, it emerged from the '*Union of Unemployed of Iraq*'. Iraq has mass unemployment and there have been organised demonstrations against civil government. Workers organised themselves and demonstrated real bravery. Major issues were responding to the needs of working people; organisation and welfare.

Major obstacles were:

- the present instability and unemployment;
- trade union history as part of an oppressive government machinery (leading to a loss of trust, a tradition of working class non-involvement in trade union);
- a history of sanctions and despotism;
- the popularity of Islamic movements;
- the position of women;
- the isolation of working people from decision-making; and
- tribal and religious traditions.

Occupation and war had also led to problems:

- a Governing Council built on ethnic, national, religious divisions;
- conflicts between the militias and absence of security;
- intervention by the current administration and exclusion of some workers' organisations;
- influence of political groups (eg the Kurdish Nationalist Party) and imposition of unions on workers at oil processing companies;
- Government imposing its own agendas; and

- unemployed workers obliged to accept any conditions imposed including membership of a specified political group.

What is needed?

- the ability to represent and the power to unify workers
- an understanding that it is workers' responsibility, rather than government's, to organise workers;
- international labour standards; and
- international contacts and partnerships.

Questions and comments from delegates

It was said that UK trade unionists were generally not interested in internationalism. Many in the anti-war movement use the confusion about what is happening in Iraq to not get involved with reconstruction. There is a perception that there can be 'no trade unionism under occupation.' So if we get involved we will be viewed as collaborationists. However we should support any genuine trade union.

There are divergent views among the Iraqi trade unionists themselves, does there not need to be more dialogue between the unions?

Both the US and UK are responsible for the occupation – trade unionists in the UK have not forgiven them, both are 'privatising governments'.

Workshop 3

Jabar Faris, General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (GFITU)

An outline of the development of the trade union movement in Iraq from 1929 was given. There has been two-fold struggle, first a national struggle against the British and later a social struggle for better conditions. The basic labour law from 1958 allowed for only one national federation. The current situation allows for more democracy and pluralism but the state is finding it difficult to 'let go'. Hence Allawi only recognises the IFTU even though there are five national centres. The trade union movement is back to same two-fold struggle, on a national basis against the US occupation and on a social basis against unemployment and forced privatisation. All groups must have the chance equally to practice trade unionism

and grow without interference, whilst accepting regional and international labour standards.

Hassan Jumaa al Jawad, President of the Basra Oil Workers Union

Iraq like all civilised societies believes in pluralism, but it also needs some restrictions to prevent the return of the Ba'athists. Assistance is needed to build structures. The future is more important than our present stage of occupation. The US is seeking all out privatisation, so even when troops withdraw, we will be left with economic occupation. The main question facing all Iraqi unions is whether they are for or against privatisation.

There is a danger in trying to force everyone into a single trade union structure at this time. Hence an international conference to consider how international help can best be channelled to all genuine trade unions is required.

In terms of practical needs, we need training and mechanisms to be able to exchange experience, to provide us with the foundations to develop unions.

Questions and comments from delegates

The speakers were asked if they had they expelled all elements of former regime and in what ways were they new organisations? Also why was there a need for different national centres?

In response it was said that all elements of the former regime had been removed, and the different national centres were required because of the complex politics and over 200 political parties. There was a danger of narrow, partisan policy, but many unions were not affiliated to any of the national centres. Trade union structures should be removed from political structures. All oil workers should join one union otherwise the working class would be weakened.

It was said that British trade unions should not tell Iraqi trade unions how to conduct their affairs but Congress policy said that we support the IFTU. Given this the speakers were asked what they thought about the IFTU? They were also asked about their attitude towards equality for women.

In reply, it was said that it was ultimately Iraqis who must choose - the TUC could choose to deal with only one union if it wished, but it should be aware that there

are more. The Oil Workers Union was formed in 2003 with the double purpose to organise relations between workers and managers and to look at the longer term economic interests of the Iraqi people. The union had 23,000 members and co-ordinated across Iraq. It was said that women are important in the industry and it is important to ensure their active participation.

It was said that the IFTU was formed by three political parties including the Communist Party, the Pan-Arabic party and the Government. Government instructions said that one should only work with IFTU. According to the GFITU, women's participation was vital: 20% of GFITU membership was female, women chair a number of their unions and 25% of the executive were women.

Moving on from differences, the speakers were asked whether they thought unity was important, and should all oil workers be in a single union?

It was said that there were several unions and the situation was not clear yet, but unity would be the ideal. The Oil Union was based in the south and they had tried to set up in other areas, but the response had not been encouraging. It was said that in every governorate there was an oil and gas union affiliated to the regional GFITU structure, but it was pointed out that if all claims to membership and structures were true then there would be no need for the day's event as Iraq would already be fully unionised!

What unions are doing and what more can we do?

The second three workshops involved presentations by British Unions and Global Unions Federations who presented the support projects they were currently working on and explained how they may be able to further assist Iraqi unions. This was followed by discussion between delegates about both the needs of Iraqi unions and exploring possible ways of meeting those needs.

The following British Union and Global Union Federation speakers make presentations:

- Heba El-Shazli, AFL-CIO;
- Nick Crook, Unison;
- Kemal Ulker, ITF; and
- Jim Catterson, International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM).

Workshop 1

Heba El-Shazli, AFL-CIO

The Solidarity Center described how over the last three months, they have been issuing questionnaires to Iraqi trade unionists asking questions in the following areas:

- What do you believe trade unions are for?
- What training do you need?
- What are the challenges and problems?
- What sort of climate is needed?

However findings have not yet been analysed and the plan is that dependent upon the finding a programme of support would be provided for Iraq. The Center had already conducted programmes in Amman, Jordan and in Kurdistan and provided the following:

- financial and other support given to the ICFTU;
- supported Iraqi journalist and teaching unions, provided training and run workshops; and
- assisted Iraqi delegates to attend the ICFTU congress in Japan.

Nick Crook, Unison

Unison have been working with Iraqi and Kurdish trade unions and the IFTU since July 2004 in the following areas:

- delivered a pilot training programme for six organisers in November 2004, assisted by a grant from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy;
- a full training programme scheduled for later this year for 60-100 organisers over an 18 month period, taking place in Amman, Kuwait and UK. Course covers British trade unionism, key organising skills, recruitment and retention of members, branch and workplace visits and how to set up a training programme in Iraq;
- other unions needed to assist with providing wider range of workplace and branch visits outside the public sector; and
- currently sponsoring Iraqi trade unionists studying at Ruskin College.

Questions and discussions

It was said that we must respond to need, not inflict our way of thinking. We should be non-judgemental and share ideas and experiences

There was a need to avoid duplication – for example, setting up a network of union activists to meet regularly (and email) to exchange ideas, raise awareness and let others know what we are doing. Maybe this would be better not TUC-led, for greater flexibility.

Ideas included:

- twinning UK and Iraqi/Kurdish union activists in similar industries, also links

- between women's committees;
- providing training - identifying people in UK unions with the required training skills to create a pool of people to run workshops/seminars;
 - exchange visits to bring Iraqi and Kurdish trade unionists here to see what we do and send British activists to Iraq to see the situation for themselves. EU funding might help with travel costs;
 - arranging benefit events;
 - transforming anti-war activity into solidarity with trade unionists;
 - making a video showing a day in the life of an Iraqi/Kurdish trade unionist to be shown at branches, conferences etc to raise awareness; and
 - sharing relevant publications.

The needs expressed by both the Iraqi and Kurdish trade unionists were similar:

- union offices had been destroyed so assistance was needed to rebuild them;
- equipment for offices was needed e.g. fax machines, computers. They needed means of communication between branches and HQ;
- union officials were unpaid – full time officials were needed. Members' subscriptions did not currently cover costs; and
- expertise and training in organising were important.

Money was not the main problem – Iraq was rich but 35 years of an oppressive regime meant it needed help. The Kurdish trade unionists pointed out that support programmes were needed to benefit the whole of civil society, not just the trade union movement. They wanted British delegations to visit Iraq and Kurdistan to see what was needed. Investment in Kurdistan was needed to rebuild infrastructure and to provide jobs and technology: not just 'Oil for Food'.

Workshop 2

Kemal Ulker, International Transport Workers' Federation

ITF's work in the region had been transformed after a conference of the ICFTU. The conference looked at the relative lack of influence the GUFs and ICFTU had in the Arab world. In particular, it was identified that:

- there were no structures within the GUFs/ICFTU to articulate a distinctive Arab trade union voice;
- Arab trade union involvement in the GUFs was very limited; and

- there were no GUF representatives on the ground in the Arab world. An additional limiting factor was the lack of materials from the ICFTU/GUFs in Arabic.

Progress has since been made with ICFTU and ITF offices opening up in Amman. This had led to materials being translated and a number of conferences/seminars being held. Such conferences are typified in the Arab trade union world by political statements usually supporting the views of their own government to which many of the Arab trade unions are politically close. But this was beginning to break down in the conferences the ITF had held in the region with an increasing weight being given to such industrial matters such as privatisation. In organising such events the ITF did not involve itself in internal disputes and rivalry between Arab trade unions.

Questions and discussions

It was said that it was difficult to engage with parts of the Iraqi trade union movement simply because of the lack of infrastructure in the ground. The most difficult problem could simply be who is there to talk to? Education International was working with UNESCO to reconstruct the university sector.

Amaya Fernandez was asked to provide more information on the ICFTU's work in the region and what problems they were facing. Amaya underlined the sheer difficulties of operating in an environment where the security situation was so bad. She referred to the recent elections in Iraq in which the borders were closed and Iraqi delegates were stranded in Amman with unforeseen costs to the ICFTU. The time needed to obtain visas' for delegates was another problem. There were also problems of co-coordinating with NGOs, a problem that she thought would get worse once the GUFs /NGOs were able to spend more of their time operating inside Iraq. Interventions were being made without the necessary follow-up to assess their impact.

Amaya also referred to a recent seminar/conference in Amman where Iraqi delegates were briefed on the draft of the new Iraqi labour code by ILO officials who were responsible for its production; thereby helping to widen the feedback on the draft code.

Several of the Iraqi delegates referred to the deficiencies in the current draft of the labour code in particular:

- it did not give Iraqi workers the right to two continuous days off in the week;
- it made no mention of social and unemployment benefits; and
- the working week was defined as 48 hours based on an Iraqi labour code which went back to 1936 – they suggested that 35 hours would be more reasonable.

The need to apply pressure from Britain to help the Iraqi trade union movement was stressed. A concrete example was that while the Americans had not signed up to the ILO Convention on Freedom of Association the British Government had.

Delegates from the Union of the Unemployed and the Federation of Workers Councils complained about the lack of recognition and support their organisations had received from the TUC and others as opposed to the IFTU, although they took note of and welcomed their involvement in the conference and saw this as a significant and welcome shift in the TUC's stance. They underlined the positive work their organisations had been conducting including a recent conference in Basra involving 375 delegates amongst which there were many women whose role was recognised by their male colleagues.

Many UK delegates acknowledged that until recently solidarity work had been largely taking place through the IFTU and welcomed what was now a more inclusive strategy for engagement. The general feeling of UK delegates was that we should be prepared to work with any bona fide representatives of Iraqi labour. This was the policy of the ICFTU. The burning issue was to help the Iraqi trade union movement to organise and that whatever federation ultimately “triumphed” was a matter for Iraqi workers.

Iraqi delegates emphasised the suffering and destruction the war and occupation had brought despite the welcome toppling of Saddam and the need for the occupying troops to leave Iraq. This prompted a number of interventions concerning:

- whether the call for the immediate withdrawal of troops was consistent with the desire to improve the lot of Iraqis in general and help to support a free and

democratic trade union movement in Iraq; and

- that worthy as it was to support the trade union movement, several British delegates thought that the more burning needs of the Iraqi people were for the basics of life such as clean water, electricity and medicine

Zuhair Al-Jazairy of the Iraqi Journalists' Union referred to a number of needs/problems faced by members of his industry:

- a continuing need to ensure that neither the union nor individual journalists are interfered with in reporting the news;
- that because foreign news agencies found it difficult and very expensive to put their own journalists into Iraq this had led them increasingly to use Iraqi journalists. In using Iraqi journalists, News Agencies were not providing them with insurance nor providing adequate security; and
- there will shortly be 28 TV channels operating inside Iraq but Iraq doesn't have the number of trained people available to support this level of activity – therefore there was a vocational training need.

He called for the twinning of Iraqi papers with those in Britain – again to address a training need, and he also called for a greater involvement of women in the industry.

There were a number of interventions from union officials asking how they could get involved and in some cases pointing out it was difficult to know what Iraqi unions they could twin with and help support.

Workshop 3

Jim Catterson, International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM)

Following on from the 2003 Congress decision to expand work in North Africa and the Middle East, ICEM has been working on planning and making contacts; and helping to facilitate contact between the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and the ICFTU. ICATU's policy of one affiliate per country means that currently they only recognise the GFITU.

Although ICEM takes the view that it was too early to affiliate unions in Iraq they are prepared to work with anyone that can demonstrate an industrial structure and

who can show real representation in the workplace. The point was made again that if all figures were believed union density would be above 100%.

One practical example of ICEM's work was the project they are undertaking with ITF on off-shore oil rigs in the region. Here they are making use of framework agreements including two with multi-national enterprises heavily involved in Iraq (ENI/AGIP and Luc Oil Sic), to insist that all ILO standards must be applied.

The main challenge for ICEM in Iraq was the difficulty posed by the security situation, which prevents international trade unionists being able to enter the country and to be able to assess the situation for themselves. There were also difficulties for Iraqis leaving the country.

Questions and discussions

The Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) were on a delegation two years ago looking at rail unions. They have since provided the IFTU with computers and financial support. They have maintained a dialogue with the IFTU and will continue to provide them with practical support. A clear distinction should be drawn between solidarity and actually telling Iraqi unions what to do. There was also a real concern that confusion over who to support would lead to nothing being done.

Unison have also developed links with IFTU after a meeting with the IFTU general secretary here in the UK with RMT. Although they were initially looking at providing ICT support, they hit upon a number of practical problems such as the need for Arabic keyboards (not common in the UK).

Hassan Jawad stressed the importance of assistance reaching all - the railway union in Baghdad had received support but not in Basra. He suggested dividing Iraq into three areas to ensure support reached all regions as many areas were not getting the support they desperately needed. Keith Sonnet pointed out that TUC and the GUFs had a key role in coordination and that an essential part of this conference was about bringing together a broad spectrum of unions in Iraq.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has now visited both Basra and Kurdistan three times. They stressed their confidence in the IFTU as a genuine organisation and are happy to provide direct support to them through their UK representative in the

form of tickets, phones, office space etc. They feel that it was vital to provide support in the form of equipment and they have already sent £4000 worth of fire-fighters' kits and are organising another container for Kurdistan. One can provide different types of support, such as money so they can buy equipment, ICT parts which are cheaper there or in the form of education and training. One needs to go to Iraq to actually see what is happening. One suggestion would be for unions to back a specific project such as rebuilding a union office.

The Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G), felt that there was lots that can be done: their parliamentary branch for example organised a branch quiz to fund IFTU transport costs. Although the picture regarding Iraqi unions will remain confused for some time to come, they believe that the IFTU is the biggest and most transparent.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) was trying to get as much information as possible out to its members about the situation in Iraq. PCS asked if the TUC could produce a guide to what is happening with different structures in Iraq and about solidarity work. They are interested in the possibility of twinning branches with particular connections, for example the north London branches where there is a high Kurdish population with those in Kurdistan or civil service branches with civil service branches in Iraq.

There is however a danger that lots of separate approaches would be made to Iraqi unions. It was felt that although the situation was confusing it was not discouraging. Delegations need to spend more time with all groups. The visits would serve a useful purpose in themselves, just making the unions come together to receive delegates in Iraq is actually constructive. There is a lot of co-operation at local level, but not enough at the national or international levels. There is a danger that UK unions will only end up working with groups who have representation in UK because they are easy to approach.

Other suggestions included a big union fundraising event like the Rise festival, placing information in union journals about people in similar jobs, and making links between anti-privatisation campaigns here and in Iraq.

Appendices

Conference programme

Introductions by Sue Rogers, TUC General Council, Conference Chair

Iraq: the current situation

- Walid Hamdan, Middle East Region, ILO
- Amaya Fernandez, Asia Desk ICFTU
- Harry Barnes MP, Labour Friends of Iraq

Morning workshops: Iraqi trade unions, led by Iraqi trade unionists

Afternoon workshops: British Unions and Global Union Federations - what we are doing and what more can we do?

Feedback from workshops

Conclusions and future activity: Sue Rogers, Keith Sonnet and Owen Tudor, TUC

Glossary

- AFL–CIO - American Federation of Labour–Congress of Industrial Organisations: the US trade union national confederation
- CWU - Communication Workers Union
- FBU - Fire Brigades Union
- FES – Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- FWCUI - Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq/ UUI – the Union of the Unemployed in Iraq
- GFITU – General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions
- GFTU - General Federation of Trade Unions
- GUFs - Global Union Federations (sectoral organisations)
- ICATU - International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions
- ICEM - International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (a GUF)
- ICFTU – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
- IFBWW - International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (a GUF)
- IFJ - International Federation of Journalists
- IFTU – Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions
- ITF - International Transport Workers' Federation (a GUF)
- ITGLWF - International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (a GUF)
- NASUWT – National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers
- PCS - Public and Commercial Services Union
- PSI - Public Services International (a GUF)
- PUK - Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
- RMT - Rail Maritime and Transport Union
- T&G - Transport and General Workers' Union

Pre-conference press release

Iraqi workers seek TUC help to rebuild unions

Eight Iraqi trade unionists will speak at a TUC conference in London today (Monday) calling for solidarity from British trade unions to rebuild the Iraqi trade union movement. They will be asking for financial support, training for union representatives and leaders, and advice on recruitment, tackling unemployment and privatisation.

TUC General Secretary **Brendan Barber** said:

“Trade unions offer ordinary Iraqi and Kurdish workers a voice they are being denied by the situation in their country – the chance to escape from the twin traps of the occupation and the so-called insurgency. They represent the true spirit of Iraq – urban, prosperous and tolerant.

“British workers benefit from the rights that trade unions have won and the protection we offer against bad bosses. Iraqi and Kurdish workers need those rights and protections too. Unions in Britain and Iraq will work together to make sure that Iraqi and Kurdish unions can rebuild themselves and help rebuild democracy, freedom and the economy.”

The eight Iraqis come from three union confederations in Baghdad, the Basra oil workers’ union, the teachers’ association and journalists’ union of Iraq and the Kurdistan Workers’ Syndicate. Forty years ago, the Iraqi trade union movement had a million members and was the strongest trade union movement in the Middle East until it was smashed by Saddam Hussein.

As well as the Iraqis, the conference will be addressed by Harry Barnes MP who set up Labour Friends of Iraq and did his national service in Basra, and the event will be chaired by TUC General Councillor and teachers’ union leader Sue Rogers who grew up in Kirkuk.

UNISON Deputy General Secretary Keith Sonnet will also speak alongside representatives of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the UN workplace organisation, the ILO. The conference will be attended by all the major British trade unions, and by the global unions covering oil workers and transport workers.

Unions at the conference will be urged to raise money for the TUC Aid for Iraq Appeal, and provide practical assistance in the form of training, material support and security. Initiatives could include paying for an IFTU Theatre Bus to tour Iraqi workplaces and explain the case for joining trade unions; refurbishing damaged union buildings; providing mobile phones, faxes and laptop computers; and printing materials on subjects as diverse as labour law and improving the position of women in the unions. The TUC will also be proposing that British unions twin with their sister organisations in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Iraqi trade unionists, all of whom are available for interview (in translation from Arabic or Kurdish in most cases) on Monday and for the next few days, are:

- Ghasib Hassan, President of the Railway and Aviation Union (IFTU – Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions)
- Zuhar lal Jazairy, Journalists' Union and Editor of Al Mahda newspaper
- Ali Shari Ali, Teachers' Union
- Hassan Jumaa al Jawad, President of the Basra Oil Workers Union
- Hangaw Abdulla Khan, Head of the Kurdistan Workers' Syndicate and Sdeeq Ramadhan Hassan, Executive Bureau member
- Falah Alwan, Federation of Works Councils and Trade Unions in Iraq
- Jabar Faris, General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions

Suggested solidarity work

The following paper was circulated to conference delegates for ideas – it is currently being worked up into a full programme of work for the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee

Summary

This document sets out the ways in which British trade unionists can develop practical solidarity with Iraqi trade unionists, covering

- fundraising;
- awareness raising and developing contacts;
- providing material support; and
- training.

Fundraising

1 One of the main requirements of the Iraqi trade union movement is funds. These are required to pay for organisers' and officials' wages; to purchase materials such as communication equipment (telephones, laptops, modems), transportation for internal travel, paper and administrative running costs such as desks, and rent, purchase or construction of buildings; and for foreign travel to events, training courses and meetings.

2 The TUC has established TUC Aid for Iraq, through our charitable arm TUC Aid, and a flyer has been produced which can be ordered as paper copies or as artwork (copies will be circulated). This can receive funds through cheques, bank transfers, credit card and cash. Credit card donations can be made through the TUC website and will attract tax rebates. It is also possible to arrange give as you earn schemes deducting direct from payroll, although these will go into TUC Aid's general funds as it is impossible to separate them out from other donations. It would be useful to know of any individual union funds.

3 In addition, both the IFTU and the FWCUI have established appeals, for a theatre bus and for conferences in Basra and Baghdad respectively. It would also be possible to make donations direct to the ICFTU International Solidarity Fund and those of the Global Union Federations.

4 As well as direct donations from unions, it is possible to raise funds through individual member donations (especially via the TUC website), branch donations (depending on union rules) and collections at branch meetings, workplaces and union events. It is also possible for the TUC and unions to solicit donations from donor bodies such as government and charities. Lastly, unions and other bodies could be urged to sponsor specific activities or purchases.

5 There is an urgent need to increase donations to the TUC Aid appeal, and the TUC will be exploring a range of options (a launch was held in October, but there is no reason not to launch it again and again, if there are good enough opportunities). The tsunami appeal has overshadowed this more direct form of union solidarity. Some ideas which unions could pursue are:

- printing articles in union journals urging donations;
- circulars to union branches, regions and districts etc urging them, where appropriate, to make donations;
- creating links direct to the appeal on the TUC website (artwork is available for this);
- allocating union income from things such as commissions on insurance and so on to the TUC Aid for Iraq appeal;
- specific fund-raising events at national level (especially piggy-backing onto existing events); and
- encouraging local activists and organisations to run workplace or branch collections, quiz nights, socials and so on.

Other ideas would be welcomed.

Awareness raising and developing contacts

6 The Congress resolution on Iraq put great stress on developing links between British and Iraqi trade unionists, and this is of course an excellent way of increasing awareness of the issues. In particular, links between women trade unionists have been stressed. These contacts could be developed through:

- inviting Iraqi trade unionists to address union meetings/meet union activists;

- attending international events at which Iraqi trade unionists are present;
- developing twinning arrangements (Unison and others have produced guides on this) between union structures at sectoral, regional and local level (and even branches/workplaces in some cases) as well as at national level;
- visits to Iraq (although in many cases these will be difficult until the security situation improves); and
- drawing attention to relevant websites (the IFTU, FWCUI, ICFTU websites have a lot of useful material, and the ICFTU and DfID both distribute electronic bulletins).

Again, further ideas are encouraged.

7 In all this work, the TUC can of course advise, not least about contact details and visa requirements (which can be quite onerous for Iraqis visiting the UK). But it is important also that unions operate through their Global Union Federations, so that unions can interact with those Iraqi organisations closest to the ground, to diminish the appearance of working too closely with the occupying powers and so that sectoral organisations are strengthened in Iraq. There is also a need for balance between different political strands in the trade union movement in Iraq, and for efforts to be made to link up with Kurdish union movements.

Providing material support

8 The need for material support has been referred to above. In part, it has proved difficult to obtain clear information about what Iraqi trade unionists would find useful, not least because of the very confused nature of events. But clearly there is a need for materials which will help unions to function, such as:

- buildings for meetings/conferences and organisation – these can be rented, built or bought – repairs in particular are needed in many places;
- office furniture – desks, chairs, filing cabinets, photocopiers or other reproduction technology – and disposables such as paper, pens and so on;
- transport facilities, not just for foreign travel, but or movement around the country, transport of materials and so on. Rail services and other mass public transit are often not an option, meaning that unions need

- vehicles and petrol and maintenance;
- organisers' salaries – obviously it would be preferable for unions in Iraq to raise their own funds for expenditure like this, to avoid becoming dependent, but we need to recognise that the movement needs rebuilding, and a certain amount of pump priming would be valuable;
 - communication technology – mobile phones, fax machines, computers (laptop and desktop, including for membership records), modems and so on; and
 - literature – there is a need for training literature and reference works for activists and officials, and leaflets, recruitment material, bulletins and so on for members – obviously this needs to be in Arabic or other languages than English.

As usual, further ideas would be useful.

9 It would be very useful to be able to develop a shopping list of all these materials with prices, so that it is easier to solicit donations and sponsorship (people like to know what their solidarity money will buy), develop funding applications and so on.

10 It has also proved possible to develop links such as those between the FBU and fire fighters in Iraq based on the provision of basic work equipment (in that case, personal protective equipment). This is of material value to the workers concerned (minimising the risks of corruption or loss), and assistance can be solicited from employers. It also helps to reinforce the way in which workers in Iraq have much in common with workers in Britain and helps gain publicity (the latest FBU donation was covered on the BBC website among other places).

Training

11 Training in trade union issues has long been identified as one of the major contributions that the British trade union movement can offer. It can be funded through union donations, direct provision by unions, and by soliciting funds from bodies such as the British Council (they administer the DfID political participation fund) and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

12 The issues where training would seem most appropriate are: union leadership and union-building, recruitment (and organising broadly), promotion of women in the union, collective bargaining and dealing with labour laws. The TUC does of course already have a lot of material here and we believe it can be adapted to the Iraqi situation fairly simply (most of the principles are similar).

13 Courses can be delivered in several ways. Unison have flown people to the UK for training, visits and meetings (this is expensive, but can perform awareness raising and link-building roles as well as training); other organisations like the ICFTU have carried out training in Amman, Jordan (and it is possible that Kuwait City would be a useful venue for Basra trade unionists) or in Kurdistan. Training so far has mostly been for leaders, and whilst that is useful in itself (and for serving other purposes like relationship-building), there is a need to get the training further down the structure. The tradition of TUC training, of delivery direct to workplace reps near to their home is obviously difficult for security reasons (and logistics, and in terms of presentation), so it would be fair more sensible to pull potential trainers into Amman, Kuwait City or Erbil for example, and provide them with trainer training so that they can then deliver the training themselves.

TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee

The TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee has the following membership and terms of reference

Membership

- Chair: Sue Rogers, General Council and NASUWT
- General Council representatives: Andy Gilchrist and Keith Sonnet
- Amicus – Harriet Eisner
- Aslef – A Reed
- AUT – Jonathan Whitehead
- Community – Michael Walsh
- CWU – Billy Hayes
- FBU – Brian Joyce
- GMB – Joni McDougall
- Natfhe – Mary Davis
- NUJ – Tim Lezard
- PCS – Hugh Lanning
- RMT – Arthur Grundy
- T&G – John Fisher
- TSSA – Andy Bain
- Unison – Nick Sigler
- Usdaw – Bill Snell
- Observers – P Kamalam (ICFTU), Mary Senior (STUC)

Terms of reference

- to liaise with and give practical support to trade unions in all parts of Iraq;
- to promote the TUC Aid for Iraq appeal within unions and to a wider public;
- to oversee TUC and union practical solidarity work with Iraqi and Kurdish trade unionists, including promoting links, especially with women's organisations; and
- to report to the TUC Executive Committee periodically and directly to TUC affiliates about its work and the needs of the Iraqi trade union movement.

