



# Learning together

A report of a delegation of Iraqi and Kurdish teacher union representatives to Britain, November 2005

The TUC and its main affiliated teaching unions (ATL, AUT, EIS, NASUWT, NATFHE and NUT) invited a delegation of seven Iraqi/Kurdish teacher union representatives from the Iraqi Teachers Union (ITU) and the Iraqi Kurdistan Teachers Union (IKTU) to visit Great Britain from 26 November to 4 December 2005. The delegation included two women and five men who came from various teaching sectors of the Iraq education system, ranging from primary schools to higher education and university levels. The visit was funded mostly by the individual unions, with additional funding from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, whose assistance in securing visas was also much appreciated.

This report, drawn up by General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) International Representative Abdullah Muhsin who accompanied the delegation, records the main points of the delegation's visit and makes some tentative recommendations for future work.

## aims of the visit

The TUC solidarity conference recommendations of February 2005 state that independent and democratic Iraqi unions are essential to Iraq's democratic stability, security and social progress. The TUC and its affiliated unions have since endeavoured to help develop the capacity of free and democratic Iraqi unions. The TUC has sought to ensure that unions in Iraq are not left on the sidelines but are fully taken into consideration in the reconstruction of Iraq. The TUC has also lobbied the British Government to ensure that the reconstruction of Iraq is consistent with the ILO's core labour standards. The aim of this visit was to contribute to the above objectives but also it sought to:

- strengthen ties between the TUC affiliated teaching unions and their counterparts, the ITU and IKTU in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan;
- share knowledge and exchange views;
- enable the ITU and the IKTU to draw from the vast expertise of the British teaching unions in the field of trade unionism;
- help boost Iraqi women's trade unionists confidence and help reduce gender bias against them in unions and wider society;
- identify ways in which the TUC affiliated teaching unions can help in providing with practical support and to assist the development of the Iraqi/Kurdish fledgling teachers unions;
- help bridge the cultural divide between white and blue-collar workers in Iraq; and
- assist in enabling the ITU to work closer with the rest of the Iraqi trade union movement. Historically teachers and other professional associations in Iraq see themselves as somehow different or superior to their counterpart colleagues in the blue-collar sector<sup>1</sup>.

The TUC and its teaching unions' programme for the Iraqi/Kurdish delegation consisted of five full working days that included, in addition to meeting with British teaching unions:

- a meeting with Government officials from the Department for Education and Skills;
- visits to a primary school in London (Tollgate School) and London Metropolitan University;
- a meeting with the Trade Union Group of Labour MPs at the House of Commons; and
- a visit to the Scottish Parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> It appears that as a consequence of the recent anti-union order 8750 issued by the current government of PM Al Jaafari, the teachers union alongside another 24 Iraqi professional associations and the GFIW have formed a coordinating committee to organise and coordinate the efforts to defeat order 8750.

The TUC General Secretary and the leaderships of the British teaching unions, including NUT General Secretary Steve Sinnott, hosted a formal welcome dinner at the TUC's Congress House. The Iraqi/Kurdish teacher delegation had two free days over the weekends at either end of the visit for sightseeing and rest.

### **Delegation**

The delegation consisted of:

- Abdullah al-Hamed Th.Abass, the Head of ITU
- Dr Amer Y Khudhir, member of the ITU Executive Committee and head of the international department of the union
- Abd H Nisar, member of the ITU Executive Committee
- Mahdy Ali Lafta, Head of the ITU in Baghdad Al Risafa
- Baidaa. Kh. Kadhem, Deputy Head of women's affairs in Baghdad Al Risafa
- Bushra Taleea, Head of women's affairs in Baghdad
- Yousif Saleh, the General Secretary of the IKTU

# brief history of Iraqi/ Kurdish teachers' unions

The ITU and the IKTU are two separate entities. Both are independent and were formed in the second half of the 20th century. Both have a history of militancy and played a key role in the development of the modern politics of Iraq. But after Saddam Hussein assumed absolute political authority in Iraq in 1979 both unions were compromised and became a front for the regime. Those Iraqi/Kurdish teachers who differed with Saddam's Ba'ath Party had no choice but to operate in deep underground work or go into exile.

## **ITU**

The ITU reconstituted itself democratically in an open conference in Baghdad in the summer of 2003 only a few months after the fall of Saddam's regime on 9 April 2003. The union claims to organise across Iraq except Iraqi Kurdistan and has 15 branches with a membership of over 300,000; just in Baghdad the union claims to have a membership of 70,000 colleagues. The ITU is planning to hold its second conference in September 2006.

## **IKTU**

The IKTU re-established itself democratically in 1992 in a re-founding conference after the creation of the Safe Haven by the UN. The union has, since 1992, been organizing openly and now claims to represent 100,000 members in the three official Kuridsh provinces - Erbil, Dukok and Sulymania but also claims to organize in Kirkuk. The ethnic identity of Kirkuk is in dispute between the Iraqi ethnic communities. The IKTU has held three conferences; the last one was in the summer of 2004.

The ITU and IKTU work closely and share common strategic aims such as the formation of a democratic, federal and open society in Iraq. Both unions openly endorsed the political process and actively engaged in the 30 January 2005 election, the ratification of Iraq's constitution and the 15 December 2005 general election.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Members from both unions enlisted themselves as candidates on the 15 December 2005 election but representing parties which they are members of, and not their teachers unions.

# summary of the delegation's itinerary

The delegation's first official engagement was on 28 November. That day was packed with meetings, which began at 9am and ended at about 11pm when the delegation took a sleeper train to Edinburgh.

London - Monday

## **TUC**

The delegation met Owen Tudor who welcomed them formally to Congress House. He then handed over to Simon Steyne, TUC International Officer and UK Worker Member of the ILO Governing Body. Simon Steyne gave a presentation on the ILO Core Labour Standards and the 1998 ILO Declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work. Simon made a direct reference to Iraq's proposed Labour Code and the recent anti-union order No 8750. A discussion followed, which focused mainly on the current Iraqi Government anti-union Order No 8750<sup>3</sup>, which froze unions' monies. The delegation sought TUC support in defeating this law. Since late August 2005 and at the request of the Iraqi trade union movement the TUC has led a worldwide protest against Iraqi Government Order No 8750.

The delegation had three meetings with the TUC Organisation and Services Department: the first was with Iain Murray who discussed the TUC Education Policy and touched on the current Government white Paper. The second and third meetings were with Jackie Williams and Martin Hegarty, who gave two presentations on education courses for trade unionists in general and courses that were especially designed for union officials. Jackie Williams said that the TUC trains 42,000 trade union representatives every year in the TUC network of 75 colleges. The TUC designs courses in workplace representation, health and safety and equalities and pensions.

## **Department for Education and Skills**

The Iraqi/Kurdish teacher delegation had two very informative meetings at the DfES. Fred Sharrock of the National Strategic Policy Team met the delegation and talked about government education policy and its current proposed White Paper. He mentioned the raising standards of education during the last ten years. Alan

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<sup>3</sup> On August 2005, the Council of Ministers of the Iraqi Government issued Order No 8750, which was signed by the Cabinet General Secretary and which marks a critical moment in post-Saddam Iraqi politics. Order No 8750 revokes the former arrangements announced under the Transitional Law, for trade unions to operate without undue interference or harassment from the state. (Please see more information at [www.iraqitradeunions.org](http://www.iraqitradeunions.org)).

Jones of the Design Projects Team Schools Resources Group met the delegation and talked about the renewal project for British schools for the 21st century. The delegation enjoyed both topics, and said the meetings were of enormous value.

### **House of Commons**

The Trade Union Group of Labour MPs organised a meeting for the ITU/IKTU at the House of Commons. The meeting heard two speeches by the heads of the ITU and IKTU on the current political and security situation in Iraq and the 15 December 2005 General Election. The ITU informed Labour MPs of the recent anti-union Order No 8750 passed by the Government of PM al Jaffari. The meeting was informed of the shortage of schools buildings and materials. The ITU said that the process of reforming the school curriculum had been very slow. The IKTU instead said that curriculum in the Iraqi Kurdistan had been revised and cleansed of Saddam ideology. The Trade Union Group promised the delegation that they would raise the issue (Order 8750) with the British Labour Government<sup>4</sup>.

### **Education Institute of Scotland (EIS) - Tuesday**

The Iraqi/Kurdish delegation met the President and Assistant General Secretary of the EIS at the union's head office in Edinburgh. Several meetings were arranged for the delegation with officers of various departments of the EIS who gave presentations on the history, structure, policies and development of the union since its formation. The presentations also covered recruitment policies and how to resolve disputes.

### **Scottish Parliament**

The EIS arranged for the delegation to visit the Scottish Parliament. A tour of the building and presentation on the architectural uniqueness of the building and its unforeseen cost was given. A brief historical account of Scottish democratic politics and the 1997 devolution, which led to the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, was provided.

The Iraqi/Kurdish teachers' delegation enjoyed very much the visit to Edinburgh and expressed its gratitude for the opportunity to be exposed to development of democratic politics. A direct reference was made by the delegation to the comparison between the Scottish Parliament and the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament. The delegation said "the Scottish Parliament would strengthen the unity and consolidate democracy in the UK in the same way the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament would certainly consolidate the unity of Iraq and assist in the building of a federal democratic Iraq."

On the third day of its visit, the delegation was divided into two groups. One would meet with higher education unions (AUT and NATFHE) and the second group would meet with the ATL, NASUWT and NUT.

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Order 8750 has no relevance in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## Meetings with the AUT and NATFHE – Wednesday-Friday

The AUT and NATFHE arranged two separate meetings at their head offices for the delegation. The group met officials and leaders of both unions. NATFHE arranged for the group to visit London Metropolitan University where they were guests of the Working Lives Research Institute. The Iraqi/Kurdish group addressed a specially convened staff seminar on trade unions in Iraq during which practical suggestions for academic and trade union links were discussed. The group also sat in on a research seminar on gender and labour issues.

Both the AUT and NATFHE invited the group to observe an historical merger meeting between the AUT and NATFHE in which they saw at first hand how unions handle and conduct their internal democratic politics. The meeting overwhelmingly supported the merger and a constructive debate about the future structure of the new union was conducted. The meeting heard and debated three motions in which two were rejected and one was passed. This historic meeting provided valuable opportunity for the delegation to get a real insight into how mature, democratic and independent unions function and conduct their work.

## Meetings with NUT, ATL and NASUWT – Wednesday-Friday

### **NUT**

NUT President Mary Compton and General Secretary Steve Sinnot welcomed the Iraqi/Kurdish delegation to the head office of the NUT. The General Secretary invited the group to an internal meeting where key government educational policies, such as the Education White Paper were discussed. The meeting sought ways to improve union communication with union members and the wider public.

The editor of the union journal conducted an interview with President of the ITU and General Secretary of the IKTU.

The NUT arranged an inspiring visit to a very successful primary school, the Tollgate School in Newham, London. The group were informed of the transformation of the school from a weak position to one now seen as a model. The delegation appreciated that in this case cooperation between school management and union had helped the progress of school. The delegation noted that the Head Master of the school is an NUT member.

The NUT General Secretary officially invited the Iraqi/Kurdish teacher unions to the forthcoming NUT Conference in 2006.

### **ATL**

The President and the General Secretary of the ATL, Jane Bennett and Mary Bousted, and several members of the National Executive Council met with Iraqi/Kurdish delegation over dinner and extended a verbal invitation for the Iraqi/Kurdish Teachers Unions to attend the ATL Conference in 2006.

A visit to the union's head office was organised for the following day. The Assistant General Secretary gave the group a tour of the building and its departments where they briefly met staff before meeting the heads of the ATL

media, legal, IT and finance departments. The ATL Journal interviewed the delegation.

### **NASUWT**

After a coach trip away from London, NASUWT President Peter Mcloughlin, General Secretary Chris Keates and Sue Rogers, the union Treasurer, welcomed the delegation to their Head Office in Birmingham and invited the delegation to observe an internal Education Committee meeting of the union, and then the full Executive Committee, where they listened to debate and observed democracy in action.

The Assistant General Secretary of NASUWT gave the delegation an introduction to the union's history, its current work and its structure. A tour of the head office of the union and its media, legal, and finance departments was provided.

The President and the General Secretary hosted a formal dinner for the delegation at the union head office the night before the Executive Committee meeting.

### London – Friday

After a packed week of meetings and travel, the delegation met with representatives of the TUC Iraq Solidarity Committee on Friday afternoon. The delegation explained the situation in Iraq and answered questions about:

- Decree 8750;
- life generally in Iraq;
- key collective bargaining objectives;
- labour law in Iraq and the UK;
- the position of women in teaching and in the teacher unions;
- women's representation in unions; and
- attacks on teachers in higher education and schools.

# conclusions and recommendations

The Iraqi/Kurdish teachers' delegation enjoyed very much the visit<sup>5</sup>. It provided them with a real insight on how mature and democratic unions handle and conduct their internal democracy and how best they tackle big public policy challenges.

The delegates very much appreciated the visit to the Scottish Parliament politically and culturally and the meeting with the Trade Union Group of Labour MPs at the House of Commons.

The delegates saw the success of the Tollgate School, a primary school as an example of the joint efforts and cooperation between management, union and government in transforming this school from failing position to one now seen as inspiring model.

The delegates felt the programme was rather intense and busy!

## **Recommendations**

The Kurdish female colleague, Samira A Ismaeel who withdrew her participation did so because of social stigma against women. It is, culturally, seen as bad behaviour for women to travel alone out side the country without being accompanied by male family member or close relative. This needs to be addressed.

Courses for women Iraqi/ Kurdish trade unionists in leadership and women's rights are needed to help boost their confidence. In the main, these should be courses for women only, but male members of the ITU and IKTU should also be invited to attend courses on women's issues in order to help reduce gender bias against women in unions, institutions and wider society.

Training courses for teachers (both male and female) and other Iraqi professional associations are needed in order to bridge the cultural divide between white and blue-collar workers.

Because of security problems, travel restrictions and visas issues, British unions that wish to invite Iraqi/Kurdish trade unionists to visit the UK need to allow at least eight weeks for the invitation procedure.

As the Iraqi Teachers Union is holding its second national congress in Baghdad in September 2006, it is also suggested that TUC teacher unions should consider (depending on security considerations) sending a solidarity delegation.

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<sup>5</sup> Both unions sent letters of thanks (electronically)

## annex: logistical details

The Iraqi/Kurdish delegation originally consisted of six colleagues from the ITU and two colleagues from the IKTU. Originally, the delegation planned to include two colleagues from IKTU - a female and a male and five from the ITU - four male and one female. However, four days before the delegation left Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, the two Kurdish colleagues withdrew their participation. One of them, brother Afan Husam Addin, the President of the IKTU was unable to take part because of ill health. He was recovering in Turkey at that time. The second sister Samira Ismaeel, an IKTU member and a head mistress was unable to participate for family reasons mentioned above.

As a consequence, the IKTU had to act swiftly to nominate two new delegates. The TUC, through Owen Tudor was informed of this, so that he could change visa arrangements, airline tickets and hotel reservations both in Amman and in London. The IKTU nominated its General Secretary brother Yousif Saleh to represent the union in the delegation but failed to find a female candidate in time.

This presented a difficulty with gender composition of the delegation. The ITU was consulted on this; and it promptly filled the vacant space with another ITU female colleague sister Bushra Taleea.

The delegation of six colleagues from the ITU travelled by a flight connection to the UK on the morning of 26 November 2005. The Kurdish colleague brother Yousif Saleh left Iraqi Kurdistan via Erbil airport on the 22 November 2005. He had to travel early for he needed at least three working days to apply for his visa in Amman.

The whole delegation of seven colleagues, met in Amman on the 25 November and travelled together from Amman to London on 26 November and arrived at London Heathrow at about 15:30 where they were greeted by Owen Tudor, the Head of the TUC European Union and International Relations Department. He arranged transportation by coach to the Bonnington Hotel, so that delegates could relax and rest after their long journey.

### **Visas**

The six ITU colleagues applied for their visas in Baghdad at the British Embassy and got them in less than three days. But the IKTU colleague had to go to Amman, Jordan for his visa. This is because; the journey Erbil-Baghdad-Erbil by car is dangerous. The FCO was very helpful and provided a prompt help through the British Embassy in Baghdad. The British Embassy vice councillor Trudi Kennedy was particularly helpful in arranging visas for the six ITU colleagues. The IKTU colleague had no problem in getting his visa even though he had only two days to apply for it in Amman.