
Oil strike in Basra, Iraq
TUC message of support sent
4 June 2007

TUC supports Iraqi oil workers' strike

The TUC has sent a formal message of solidarity to Iraqi oil workers striking for better terms and conditions in the south of the country today. The strike was called after weeks of negotiations had failed to produce an adequate response from the authorities to a list of nine demands, and could cut off supplies to the Green Zone in Baghdad as well as the southern Governates of Iraq.

At 06:30 this morning, 4 June 2007, workers struck at the pipeline company in Basra, Iraq, bringing an immediate stop to the free flow of oil products including kerosene and gas through the 14-inch diameter pipeline number 42. The pipe transfers oil and gas to Baghdad and the governorates of the central region of the country. The workers are members of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU).

In a message to the IFOU, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: "your justified demands deserve to be met by the Iraqi government, and we offer you our support and solidarity."

Many of the demands are related to wages and working conditions, including a demand for wage increases; the payment of a previously agreed bonus that is based on the distribution to workers of a proportion of oil revenues achieved by the company; no salary deductions to be made for granted vacation days; and the delivery of land parcels for housing to workers.

Further demands are for the recruitment of new graduates; as well as the promotion of workers where this has been stalled. The union also calls for full time permanent status to be given to workers presently classed as temporary contract workers. Faced with increased pollution in oil facilities and evidence that there is a major increase in the incidence of cancers among the workforce the union has also tabled health and safety demands.

The TUC joined the international trade union body in the oil industry – the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) in supporting the strike.

Background to the dispute

The IFOU, previously known as the GUOE-Basra, and led by union President, Hassan Juma'a Awad Alasady has over 26,000 members throughout the ten state oil companies in the south of Iraq.

The strike threat was initially made in a 27 April public letter to the Iraqi Oil Minister, following discussion at the union's Executive Board the previous day in Basra. The meeting formulated a list of demands and the call for a strike was unanimously adopted if the demands were not met by 10 May 2007.

The strike date was postponed from 10 May to 14 May as the union entered negotiations with a committee formed by the Iraqi Council of Ministers. No direct negotiations with the Oil Ministry took place and a second postponement of the strike resulted when the Prime Minister, Nouri Al-Maliki, agreed to meet the union on 16 May 2007 to avert threatened strike action that would involve all workers and technicians throughout the oil industry of the South, stopping production in all of the oil companies in Basra, Misan, Thi-Qar and Muthanna and affecting all domestic oil products as well as the export of crude oil.

The meeting resulted in the creation of a committee tasked with working on finding solutions acceptable to both sides. Although several of the union demands appear to have been fully agreed to by the authorities the IFOU's demands remain unfulfilled, and this led to this morning's strike.

The union is currently focussing on two core demands in its strike at the pipeline company:

- that the Ministry force the general manager of the pipeline company to resign; and
- that the company be financially and administratively independent from the Baghdad based central ministry and be managed locally.

The catalyst for today's action is that the general manager of the pipeline company, Adel Aziz, who is based in Baghdad rather than in Basra, denied the orders of the PM to release workers' delayed benefits and stopped a 50 000 Iraqi Dinar allowance which the workers were previously entitled to.

A second phase of the strike has been threatened to begin tomorrow morning at 06:30 if the IFOU does not receive signals of compliance with their demands. The second phase would expand the strike by closing pipeline number 48 which feeds the southern governorates with oil products.

Further information

For more information see www.icem.org/en/77-All-ICEM-News-Releases/2260-Threatened-Oil-Industry-Strike-on-Iraq

Appendix: Letter by the IFOU to Iraqi Oil Minister

His Excellency The Oil Minister

Subject: Entitlements

Sincere Salutations

It was our hope, after the fall of that statue, to witness the dawn of a new era marked by the recognition of the legitimate rights of our members in the oil sector. This sector that for so long has suffered injustice and been denied equity.

Since the advent of this new era, we focused our efforts into effectively thwarting all attempts to exploit this sector and tamper with our resources. You have been informed of how we stalled foreign companies in their attempts to control our oil fields and refineries, and how we forced them to leave.

In addition, we worked hand in hand with the ministries and agencies to accelerate the pace of oil production, and to safeguard the means of production, and raise awareness amongst workers of investing to boost the chances of success for the new era.

Unfortunately, our demands for entitlements were ignored, despite four years of continued promises by ministry and government officials. In fact, we took our demands to the highest levels of the government. We kept the prime minister apprized of our demands, but were disappointed when we came to realize that our demands fell on deaf ears.

Throughout this period we worked to defuse anger and resentment and address criticism leveled by our members who mistakenly thought of us as the ones failing to put forth their legitimate demands. Henceforth:

After extensive deliberations, and based on the resolutions that came out of an Executive Board meeting with broad member representation on Thursday 26 April, 2007 at the Gas Corporation's premises in Basra, a strike was unanimously adopted, scheduled for May 10, 2007 in all the company's branches in the south and in the following provinces Basra/Missan Dhi Kar/Al Mouthnana.

The strike will go ahead, should the following demands not be completely met:

1. Make a determination on land allotment in the Shiite Province 52 and land distribution owned by oil companies, and the parcel in the Tannouma area, a property of the Southern Oil Company.
2. Make a determination on oil companies' profits margins on the basis of the amendments to which you agreed and to determine those margins according to the certification/attestation from the south region financial/tax jurisdictions, not according to the formula adopted by the Minister that has been deemed detrimental to our membership.

3. Approval of accumulated ordinary unused vacations, and all vacations outstanding for more than 180 days. There is no justification for withholding any of these vacations. We also believe that the resolution issued by the State Advisory Council is not binding, for lack of legal foundation. We empathically insist that there be no salary deductions over the next few years for granted vacations days.
4. Granting full time status to temporary workers, notwithstanding the length of service but rather apply a more humanistic approach with those workers who are Iraqi nationals and who deserve a life in this country.
5. To hire new graduates of the last two classes.
6. Rescind the new unified payment schedule which benefits only a very small number in the sector.
7. Promote holders of elementary certificates to the next grade on par to their dismissed colleagues (for political reasons) and address the issue of stalled promotions for workers and others.
8. Rescind the 20% deduction from profits paid to the army and recovery of previous years' deductions.
9. We ask that those premises become employee-run, similar to other state-owned agencies. We deem the wait and see policy inappropriate, and we are wondering why the oil sector is treated so unfairly.

As we are stating the legitimate demands of our membership, it is our hope to obtain the support of those on whom we rely, and whom we supported with our blood in making the political process succeed.

It is our hope to reinstate the rights of those who were aggrieved by Iraqi government officials, and eliminate the injustices bestowed on the southern region.

We feel, up to the moment of this statement's drafting, that discrimination is continuing, and that the south is treated as the cash cow of Iraq.

Our region gave so much to Iraq, but gained little in return. We would like to draw your attention to the fact that pollution in oil facilities has reached a peak, and the incidence of cancer has topped exceeded predictions. We also note, that the ministry pays little to no attention to these incidences that primarily impact the inhabitants in the southern area.

We feel as if they are predestined to such a fate - to always give in vain. We are cautioning, that there is a limit to our tolerance. We ask that our demands be met. We feel that enough is enough.

Peace and grace be upon you.

Source: ICEM website