
**TUC solidarity with Iraqi workers
Iraqi government condemned
ILO Geneva 2008**

TUC slams Iraqi government at ILO

The TUC has launched a five point attack on the Iraqi government for its harassment of trade unions at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) committee on standards today (Wednesday).

Addressing the committee in support of complaints from Iraqi trade unionists, ILO Governing Body member Simon Steyne of the TUC condemned the Iraqi government for:

- using Saddam Hussein's laws to ban public sector trade unionism;
- introducing a new law to freeze union bank accounts and allow the government to interfere in union internal affairs;
- repeatedly failing to adopt an ILO-compliant labour law for several years to replace the anti-union Decrees;
- demanding elections inside Iraqi unions this summer on the government's terms, including disenfranchising public sector workers, prohibiting non-Iraqi citizens from standing for elections, and requiring candidates to secure the support of their employers; and
- relocating leaders of an Iraqi oil union specifically to disrupt the union which has consistently opposed oil privatisation.

Simon Steyne said:

"These actions are being taken by a Government that says it is too busy fighting terrorism to implement the ILO-compliant labour law, which would stop these labour rights violations. We empathise with the struggle for peace in Iraq. But it is strange that a Government too busy fighting violence should spend so much time and effort harassing one of the few institutions which unites workers regardless of tribal, ethnic or religious boundaries and is committed to women's emancipation and the creation of a peaceful and prosperous Iraq. It is certainly too busy with its Oil Law – no doubt a reason for its unwillingness to allow free trade unions in the sector."

The full text of his speech follows

“Thank you Madame Chair

“The AFL-CIO and Global Union Federations, ICEM, PSI and EI associate themselves with this statement by British workers.

“The Global trade union movement is convinced that Iraq’s future peace and prosperity depend on the development of strong, free and independent trade unions, as existed 50 years ago.

“It is said that if you are annoying everyone, that proves how independent you are. True in Iraq, where:

- the occupying forces continue to raid and ransack union offices, seizing materials and files;
- the so-called insurgents target and kill trade union leaders and ordinary workers like teachers who are training the next generation in tolerance and human rights; and
- the Government maintains laws which restrict trade unions, interfere in their internal affairs and finances, and harass their leaders.

“We have five key concerns.

“First, Saddam’s 1987 Decree 150 bans public sector trade unions. The public sector in Iraq – including oil, energy supply, public service and health - accounts for 80% of the workforce. The decree prevents the vast majority of Iraqi workers from exercising their fundamental rights and must be abolished.

“Second, Decree 8750 empowers the Government to take over trade unions at will, and has been used to freeze all Iraqi union bank accounts. It is odious, contrary to the Convention, and it too should be abolished.

“Third, apparently, an ILO-compliant labour law sits in the Ministry of Labour. Though ready for several years, we are often told it is under review. It should be adopted and implemented as promised. Any review can take place once Iraqis have seen how it works in practice.

“Fourth, direct Government interference in union affairs using both Decrees 150 and 8750. Earlier this year, the Government told the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, the main trade union confederation in Iraq, that it would release some of the frozen funds so internal elections could be held. Those elections are needed – but it should be the GFIW’s members’ decision when to hold them.

“Worse, the Government insists that election candidates must be Iraqi citizens, which is unacceptable to a free trade union movement representing workers wherever they come from. And in flagrant violation of Convention 98, they must have the support of their employer.

“The Government has used Decree 150 to insist that only unions in the private sector will be involved. This would forcibly restructure those unions with members

both in and out of the private sector, and prevents the vast majority of GFIW members from having any say in their organisation's leadership.

"Finally, we have just heard that eight leaders of the ICEM-affiliated Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions are to be moved from their jobs and homes in the southern oil fields to a violent part of Baghdad, in a move calculated to disrupt the union's activities and put them in danger. The same trick, tried previously against the leaders of the GFIW-affiliated port workers union in Um Qasr, was prevented by international and Iraqi trade union opposition.

"I might add that none of these complaints apply to Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish unions, close allies of the Iraqi unions, would not claim that everything was perfect, but at least their authorities understand the need for free trade unions.

"By contrast, the attacks on the Iraqi trade union movement come from a Government that claims to be committed to freedom of association, in a country whose constitution and ILO obligations require it.

"Even worse, these actions are being taken by a Government that says it is too busy fighting terrorism to implement the ILO-compliant labour law, which would stop these labour rights violations. We empathise with the struggle for peace in Iraq. But it is strange that a Government too busy fighting violence should spend so much time and effort harassing one of the few institutions which unites workers regardless of tribal, ethnic or religious boundaries and is committed to women's emancipation and the creation of a peaceful and prosperous Iraq. It is certainly too busy with its Oil Law – no doubt a reason for its unwillingness to allow free trade unions in the sector.

"The Government must explain the contradictions between its words and deeds, must halt anti-union repression and introduce a labour law promoting social dialogue, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The Minister, with whom I met last week, knows we have much good will and are actively supporting democratic trade union reconstruction in Iraq. We trust the Government will commit today to act without delay to ensure that law and practice will be brought into compliance with Convention 98 and, we urge, to move rapidly to ratify Convention 87.

"Thank you Madame Chair."