
Solidarity with Iraqi trade unionists
Iraqi Teachers Union
February 2010

Hands off the Iraqi Teachers Union!

The TUC, representing people at work in Britain, and comprising 59 unions with other 6 million members, calls on the Iraqi Government and Iraqi political parties to cease their interference in the free and independent Iraqi Teachers Union (ITU).

In particular, the TUC calls on the Iraqi authorities to release **Ibrahim al-Battaj** the leader of the ITU in Basra, and withdraw the arrest warrant for **Jasim Hussein Mohammed**, the national leader of the ITU.

The Iraqi Government and the main political parties (ISCI, Al Dawa, Al Sadr Movement and the Iraqi Islamic Party) stand accused of trying to manipulate the ITU ahead of the General Election to try to win the support of Iraqi teachers.

The leadership of the Iraqi Teachers Union have refused to do what the political parties want, and have refused to hand over the union or its membership lists. Jasim, Abu Muhammad, was jailed by Saddam Hussein and will not be intimidated by threats of being jailed again! In a message to the TUC, he said "We are witnessing the dispossession of the union by the government and parties."

Trade unions must be free of political and state interference. Freedom of association is a fundamental human right as set out in the core conventions of the International Labour Organisation, and that implies no outside interference in the internal democracy of the union. The Iraqi Constitution also guarantees the freedom of trade unions.

The TUC will be protesting to the ILO, to the Iraqi Government and its key Ministers and political parties, in solidarity with the Iraqi Teachers Union. We will also be urging the British Government to protest to the Iraqi regime, and will be encouraging our sister trade union movements around the world to join the campaign to free the ITU.

TUC General Secretary **Brendan Barber** has issued the following message of solidarity to the leaders of the ITU:

"British trade unions salute the bravery of the Iraqi Teachers Union and its leaders in resisting interference by the Government and political parties of Iraq. We call on Iraqi politicians to respect Iraqi teachers' desire for a free and independent trade union to represent them, and abandon threats and intimidation against its leaders."

Notes

The Iraqi Teachers Union is the representative organisation for teachers in Iraq. A sister organisation, the Kurdish Teachers Union, represents teachers in Iraqi Kurdistan. The TUC has close links with the ITU through its own teaching union affiliate, the NASUWT.

Like teachers' unions in many other countries, the ITU is viewed with suspicion and envy by political parties because of the key leadership role played by teachers in local communities. The forthcoming elections in Iraq will be fiercely contested, and political parties clearly believe that the membership of the ITU will be an important electoral battleground. Under Saddam Hussein, unions were used to control the working population and tell them what to think and do – and political parties in Iraq don't seem to have moved on from that conception of the role of trade unions.

Apart from fighting for better rights at work for teachers, the ITU stands for a secular, democratic, human rights-based education system. Its internal democracy is demonstrated by its two changes of leadership since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The ITU believes that it must be controlled by its members, and not the other way round. Article 22 of the Iraqi Constitution guarantees trade unions independence.

The current leader, Jasim Hussein Mohammed, was jailed under Saddam Hussein for promoting religious freedom. He has led successful protests for higher wages for teachers as well as fighting off previous attempts by the Iraqi government to take over the union and impose its own leadership through a ministerial committee charged with organising elections in the union (contrary to the rules of the ITU). The ITU filed a lawsuit against the government at al Adhamiya court in Baghdad, and the court issued a ruling on May 2009 which said the government and its ministerial committee must stop interfering in the union.

The ministerial committee has held a number of elections in party headquarters, or without informing members of the union. Elections held at Baghdad University were called in a note where the signature of the official calling the vote was forged, and the Dean of the Faculty of Physical Education in an official letter said that elections were fraudulent. Three days ago, on 18 February, the leader of the ITU in Basra, Ibrahim al-Battat, was arrested for refusing to hand over the ITU's local membership lists to the authorities. Now the ITU's overall leader, known as Abu Mohammed, faces an arrest warrant unless he does the same.