

Iraqi Unions Announce New Confederation at International Labor Conference

U.S. Labor Against the War March 17, 2009

At the first International Labor Conference ever held in Iraq, three of the country's major labor organizations announced the formation of a new labor confederation. At the close of the two day meeting of Iraqi unions with their international allies, Iraq's powerful Federation of Oil Unions, the nationwide Electricity Association and the General Federation of Workers Councils and Unions signed an agreement to create a new labor confederation, a step toward unifying the Iraqi labor movement as an advocate for the interests of Iraqi workers.

The conference, held on March 13-14 in Erbil in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, drew more than 200 delegates from unions and federations across Iraq and solidarity delegations from the U.S., the United Kingdom, South Africa, Japan, Australia, and Iran.

More than a year in the making, the conference drew representatives from Iraq's oil and gas industry, its port union, the electrical generation and distribution industry, construction, public sector, transportation, communications, education, rail roads, service and health care industries, machinists and metal working sector, the petro-chemical industry, civil engineers, writers and journalists, food oil workers, tailors and students. Workers attended from fifteen of Iraq's eighteen provinces.

The U.S. delegation of six was organized by U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW), a network of 186 local, regional, state and national labor organizations that together represent more than five million union members. It included USLAW National Organizer Michael Eisenscher; USLAW Steering Committee Member Michael Zweig (a leader of United University Professions/AFT Local 2190); Bill Shortell, President of the Central Connecticut Labor Council; Jim Norris, President of United Steel Workers Local 675, representing oil industry workers in Southern California; and two members of Iraq Veterans Against the War, T.J. Buonomo from Philadelphia, and Aaron Hughes of Chicago.

In his address to the conference on behalf of USLAW, Michael Eisenscher said, 'We recognize that the Iraqi people and labor movement have paid a terrible price to regain your freedom, to establish democratic control over your own government and over the fate and future of the Iraqi nation. We are painfully aware that it has been the government of the United States that is responsible for so much of the death, destruction, dislocation and suffering that the Iraqi people have endured. It was our government that provided the dictator Saddam Hussein with the means by which he waged war on his own people, as well as other nations of the region. And the working people of our own country have also paid dearly in both blood and money

for the transgressions of our government. This conference marks an important step toward full restoration of Iraqi sovereignty, which can only be achieved when all foreign military and mercenary forces depart Iraqi soil, all foreign military bases are closed, and the territorial integrity of Iraq is fully respected by all the nations of the world.'

The conference was greeted by Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) via video recording from Washington, DC, who expressed his support for the Iraqi labor movement and reiterated his long-held belief that the invasion and occupation of Iraq constituted a gross violation of international law and that all U.S. troops should be promptly and completely withdrawn.

Hassan Juma'a Awad, President of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Union, condemned efforts by the U.S. to privatize Iraq's oil industry through production sharing agreements that could cede control over Iraq's oil to foreign corporations for as long as a generation. Speaking for his 25,000 members, he called for Iraq's oil to remain under the control of the state oil company for the benefit of the Iraqi people. The conference adopted a strong resolution that described the proposed draft oil and gas law, promoted by the U.S., as 'hostile to the interests of the working class and consequently all Iraqis.' It declared, 'All sources of energy are the property of the people of Iraq, and no one has the right to privatize or monopolize these resources under any pretext. These resources must be used for the benefit of Iraqis and distributed equally.' It called for participation of representatives of the workers in the development of the oil and gas sector.

The conference also adopted another resolution that called for immediate enactment of a basic labor law that complies with International Labor Organization standards for the protection of the rights of workers to organize, collectively bargain and strike in unions of their own choosing, free of government interference. The U.S. Occupation Authority and Iraqi government continue to enforce Saddam Hussein's antiunion labor law that bans unions for all public workers and employees of public enterprises, including its oil industry.

Another resolution called for an independent Iraqi state with a 'non-sectarian, non-ethnic' government. It said, 'One of the major steps to bring stability, peace and security in Iraq is to form a government that defines people on the basis of human identity, regardless of their ethnic, religious or sectarian background.' Other resolutions addressed the global economic crisis and privatization.

A dramatic moment in the conference occurred when T.J. Buonomo, a former U.S. Military intelligence officer, and Aaron Hughes, a former U.S. Army sergeant, took the stage to deliver their remarks. It was the first time that veterans of the U.S. military had returned to publicly acknowledge crimes committed against the Iraqi people and to apologize for their role in the economic

and military occupation of Iraq. They said they were not there to ask forgiveness, but rather to take responsibility and to demonstrate their solidarity with the Iraqi people. They denounced the manipulation of intelligence, bribing of Iraqi journalists, the torture of Iraqi prisoners, the suppression of worker rights, and attempts by the U.S. government and multinational corporations to control Iraqi oil. The response was immediate, powerful, and heartfelt. One Iraqi union leader who had been considered a staunch nationalist rushed the stage to embrace the veterans. Another proclaimed that their statements had removed a great wall between the Iraqi and American people. The veterans received a standing ovation.

Summing up his estimate of the conference, Samir Adil, conference coordinator and president of the Iraq Freedom Congress, said, 'This conference represents a major advance for both the unification of the Iraqi labor movement and strengthening of the international movement in solidarity with the Iraqi people in the context of the global economic crisis and consequent global and regional political changes.'

The Iraqi government considered the conference of sufficient importance that it sent an official observer, Adnan Muhammed Kadar, Minister of Labor of the Kurdish Regional Government, who welcomed the delegates. Also attending was Hardy Shakar, representative of Bang Kee Moon, UN General Secretary.

The conference created an 'International Front Against Wars, Economic Blockade and Violation of Trade Union Rights' as a coordinating body to continue its work in the coming years.

Arabic and Kurdish media provided extensive coverage of the conference, including reports broadcast across Iraq and the Middle East.