

# Labor Rights in Occupied Lands: US Busting Labor Unions in Iraq

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It is only in comic books and Hollywood movies that America's superheroes exist to defend the underdog. In practice, the armies of America have fanned out around the globe to show they are the willing servants of the corporate overdog. As Noam Chomsky writes in his book *"Imperial Ambitions"* (Metropolitan), "You can almost predict (U.S.) policy by that simple principle: Does it help rich people or does it help the general population? And from that you can virtually deduce what's going to happen." There is no more disgraceful example than Iraq.

Instead of supporting Iraq's pro-democracy labor unions, which would have put Washington on the side of the working-class, the U.S. signaled its attitude toward Iraqi labor unions in 2003 "when coalition troops stormed the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) headquarters in Baghdad, ransacked their offices, arrested eight union workers, and shut down the office," wrote Matthew Harwood in the April, 2005, issue of *"The Washington Monthly."* Harwood added that when historians re-examine what went wrong during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, "somewhere on the list will be the administration's indifference, indeed hostility, to Iraqi organized labor. The Iraqi people are paying a price for that attitude."

This hostility continues to this very day. In an article titled, "Unionbusting, Iraq-Style," published in the October 25th *"The Nation"* magazine, author David Bacon writes "because Iraqi unions have organized opposition to privatization since the start of the occupation, the (Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-) Maliki administration is enforcing with a vengeance Saddam Hussein's prohibition of public sector unions." Last March, he writes, after oil workers protested low pay and their union's "illegal" status, "leaders were transferred hundreds of miles from home."

The unions' "crime" in Iraq is to oppose production-sharing agreements with foreign oil companies, which would then get a share of what they produce rather than a fee for services. In the past, some oil outfits used this tack to swindle their government partners out of huge sums. In Iran, BP's predecessor in the Fifties wouldn't even tell Tehran how much oil it was extracting! "Although the (Iraqi) oil union doesn't oppose all foreign investment, it has criticized the (Maliki) government for signing unfavorable contracts with oil corporations, in particular production-sharing agreements..." writes Bacon.

"Unions began to reorganize as soon as Saddam Hussein's regime fell, but they quickly found that Washington's vision of democracy didn't include their rights. After the 2003 invasion, occupation czar Paul Bremer decided to keep on the books Saddam's Law 150, which bans public sector unions.," Bacon pointed out. And while unions are suppressed,

multinational oil firms are descending on Basra's oilfields.

Bacon says the Maliki government has signed contracts with 18 companies including ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Italy's ENI, Russia's Gazprom and Lukoil, Malaysia's Petronas and a BP-Chinese National Petroleum Corp. partnership. Standing guard over the oilfields is the U.S. Army and private contractors.

Author Bacon noted further that last month the U.S. Commerce Department dispatched a trade mission to Iraq for U.S. companies that included big defense contractors. Among them was Boeing, General Electric(GE), American Cargo Transport and 12 other engineering and transportation firms out to win a share of \$80 billion for work on ports and power plants while at the same time, Bacon writes, "it prohibits unions in those industries." GE, by the way, already has landed a \$3 billion contract to rebuild power plants. Typically, the government put down a demonstration of Basra workers asking where \$13 billion allegedly spent for electricity reconstruction had gone. It was a good question since their homes are only getting a few hours of electricity daily.

In response, oil minister Hussein al-Shahristani kicked the Electrical Utility Workers Union out of its Basra offices. Hashmeya Muhsin, that union's leader, charges, "If people are desperate enough, the government believes they'll accept anything to get electricity, including privatization. It knows we won't accept that, so it wants to paralyze us so we can't speak out." Similarly, *The Nation* article quotes Hassan Juma, president of the Federation of Oil Employees of Iraq, as saying, "The government doesn't want workers to have rights, because it wants people to be weak and at the mercy of employers." Maybe that's the real reason why the president of Basra's Iraqi Teachers Union last January was tossed in jail.

As bad off as Iraqi workers may be, Third Country Nationals(TCN) shipped into Iraq to work cheap often fare worse. Author Pratap Chatterjee in his book "*Halliburton's Army*"(Nation) writes that workers "who dared to stage labor strikes and sickouts to protest their treatment at military camps faced immediate dismissal." Workers complain they are treated "like human cattle" by some of their bosses. Rory Mayberry, a former Halliburton/KBR contractor employed at the Balad, Iraq, Camp Anaconda dining facilities in 2004, said the U.S. firm was supposed to feed 600 Turkish and Filipino workers meals. Instead, the workers "were given leftover food in boxes and garbage bags after the troops ate." As long as such practices by the U.S. government and U.S. corporations continue, look for the gap between rich and poor to widen globally, just as it has been widening in America. Look for continued injustice, continued unrest, continued repression, and continued war. You'd think by now the union-busters would catch on that there is a better way. But they are proving that they have eyes only for the dollars.

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