

US Munitions Training: Iraqi Children Suffering from Radiation Sickness.

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Global Research, August 28, 2011

workersliberty.org 28 August 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Militarization and WMD](#)

The US military is making Iraqi children sick

We have a catastrophic situation in Haweeja, near Kirkuk. There is an American munitions training centre in the province and the local people are suffering from living near the weapons testing. 412 children are suffering from radiation sickness. The FWCUI recently participated in a delegation organised by the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) to meet local residents and discuss the issues. There are hundreds of people with illnesses, including cancer. People cannot afford proper medical treatment; FWCUI and OWFI are demanding that the weapons testing stops, that the site is cleaned up and that people are given access to the medical treatment they need.

Another important issue at the moment is the new harbour Kuwait is building near Iraq shores, Mubarak Port, which is named for the Kuwaiti ruling family. Iraq currently has very limited access to the sea through ports such as Umm Qasr and al-Faw. The new harbour will prevent Iraqi ports from functioning properly and will make sea trade difficult. There have been many demonstrations and protests against the building of the Kuwaiti harbour; workers and other activists have been holding demonstrations to demand construction ceases.

The Kuwaiti government is the main force behind the project but it may be working with others. It will reshape transport and trade in the Gulf and prevent Iraq from exporting gas. Many countries have interests in controlling sea trade in this area including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran. These countries may not be directly involved but they could benefit from the weakening of Iraq's sea-trading potential.

According to a member of the workers' committee in al-Faw, 100,000 jobs in Iraq will be under threat if this harbour goes ahead. Our federation has issued a statement to urge all workers to continue demonstrations and to make this issue central to the mass protest on 9 September.

The government's privatisation project is also continuing. The government wants to privatise sections of the economy currently organised under the Ministry of Industry, starting with the big companies including textiles. In total there are 69 "companies" threatened with privatisation, which employ around 250,000 workers. The privateers include both foreign and domestic "investors". The government has consistently used "investment" as a euphemism for privatisation and have attempted to privatise gradually in order to avoid big confrontations with workers. There is already significant foreign "investment" in many Iraqi industries, such as the French company Lafarge which operates cement factories.

The Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) was looking into holding national conference for workers' representatives from companies threatened with privatisation and we contacted the AFL-CIO Solidarity Centre to discuss financial support. We've since concluded it will be more practical to hold a series of regional conferences, which we plan to do in October 2011.

The Shiwashok oil refinery workers in Erbil ended their strike [which began on 2 August] after promises from management to improve safety, pay remunerations and increase salary. But they were only promises, not concrete agreements. 332 workers were involved in the strike. Workers are worried about losing their jobs if they continue strikes; their contracts are very insecure and the company sees workers as easily replaceable. There are huge numbers of unemployed people ready to take their jobs. There was a similar issue in a strike near Nasiriyah; 40 workers struck to win back pay but the bosses just sacked them. There is no job protection in workers' contracts.

On the question of the Arab uprisings, FWCUI was absolutely clear from the very start that we supported uprisings and revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya. We called for workers to play a central and defining role in each uprising. We have contacts in Egypt and Tunisia, but it's harder to make contacts in Syria and Libya. Our attitude is very clear.

The Maliki government is supporting Assad in his repression of the Syrian uprising, but that's unsurprising. Iran supports Assad, so Maliki supports Assad. He doesn't want to stray too far from Iran's line. There are rumours of his government giving money to Syria to help Assad put down the uprising.

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