



# COMMUNIQUE

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A striking Iraqi worker shuts down a pumping tube at the Iraqi Pipelines Company in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, June 5, 2007, to protest oil privatization.

# Iraqi workers take on Bush

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Local 1180 members at Human Rights First win 11.9% over three years, new longevity increases, improved pensions

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# Iraqi workers take on Bush and Big Oil

**O**n Monday, June 4, Iraqi workers in the southern oil refineries of Basra went out on strike, shutting down two pipelines and paralyzing oil and gas supplies to major areas of the country, including the capital city of Baghdad. The workers were striking on bread-and-butter issues—a salary scale that had been slashed by the Coalition Provisional Authority, poor working conditions, and a lack of health care. But they were also striking to demand a voice in the country's new oil law, being debated that month by the Iraqi parliament. President Bush has pushed hard for the law, which would open up the vast majority of Iraq's oil fields to exploitation by multinational corporations. Congress has made passage of the law a “benchmark” of progress in Iraq.

“Everyone knows that this oil law does not serve the Iraqi people,” Faleh Abood Umara, general secretary of the Federation of Oil Unions in Iraq, wrote on the eve of the strike. “It serves Bush, his supporters, and foreign oil companies at the expense of the Iraqi people.” The law, which US advisors helped to draft, would leave only 17 of Iraq's 80 known oil fields under exclusive control of the Iraqi government. The rest would be open to foreign control.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki responded to the strike by sending in the military and issuing arrest warrants for the top 10 leaders of the nation's oil unions. Umara was No. 2 on the list.

But the intimidation didn't work. “We formed a shadow committee whose names were not made public so they could continue to lead the workers in case we were arrested,” Umara told reporters. “All the other unions in the district were very supportive of us. Their solidarity extended to

demonstrations, writing letters, and taking actions in their own workplaces.”

As the strikers took a pause for negotiations to continue, Umara, along with Hashmeya Muhsin Hussein, the president of the Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union, traveled to the United States to speak with union members and ask for strike support and an end to the occupation.

## An American tour

At a packed hall at Transport Workers Local 100 on June 18, Hussein and Umara spoke, through interpreters, of the desperate economic situation for average Iraqis

under US occupation. The event was part of a national tour organized by US Labor Against the War.

“Daily life is very difficult,” Hussein said. “Of 30 million people in Iraq, 9 million are living under the poverty line. If my neighbors have food for breakfast, they don't have it for lunch, and this is true for the entire country, even though we're one of the most resource-rich countries in the Middle East. This is what we got from the occupation.”

Government subsidies of basic foodstuffs help families to survive despite up to 50 percent unemploy-

ment, but Hussein said the International Monetary Fund has encouraged Parliament to reduce or eliminate them. For those who do

have jobs, she said, a new pay scale instituted by Paul Bremer while he was head of the Coalition Provisional Authority reduced starting salaries to a meager \$55 a month. And everyone faces a lack of security, she said, with “explosions that kill Iraqis without differentiation,” and a lack of basic services such as electricity.

Hussein, the only woman to head a national union in Iraq, pointed out that Iraq had a strong labor move-

**“This oil law does not serve the Iraqi people.”**



Hashmeya Muhsin Hussein, president of the Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union, and Faleh Abood Umara, general secretary of the Federation of Oil Unions, at a public meeting hosted by TWU Local 100 on June 18. Translator Degaulle Adili is at their right.

ment before Saddam Hussein came to power. Under Saddam its leaders were assassinated or forced into exile and the movement was pushed underground. Since the fall of his regime after the US invasion in 2003, labor activists have reorganized and tens of thousands of workers are now unionized, across lines of religion, political party, gender, and national origin. Yet harassment continues: unions still have no protection under the law and their assets remain frozen, due to the continued imposition of a 1987 Saddam-era labor law. Leaders of two major unions—Hadi Saleh of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unionists and Ali Hassan Abd of the General Union of Oil and Gas have been assassinated since the US invasion.

### End the occupation

“As you all know, the occupation did not come to liberate us,” she said. “The occupation came for other purposes. Because Iraq has so many resources, the plan is to connect the Iraqi market with the global market. The occupation made Iraq an open market with no tariffs. So most factories can’t afford to continue production. We need to be in solidarity with each other to end this catastrophic war on the Iraqi people.”

The audience of more than 200 at TWU Local 100 gave Umara and Hussein a standing ovation, but several people questioned whether, given the growing insurgency, a quick withdrawal of US troops might endanger the Iraqi people. On this question, Umara was adamant, calling for the immediate end to the US occupation. “Occupation forces are the root cause of the violence in Iraq,” he said. “You have to realize that we are able to solve our problems among ourselves. Too many lives have been lost already. We’re not happy to hear about the deaths of American soldiers. We wish they would all go home safely.”

### Solidarity

Leslie Cagan, national coordinator of United for Peace and Justice, the country’s largest antiwar coalition, said the antiwar movement has long argued that the Bush Administration lied to the American people about his motives for war. “One of the main reasons they went into



Hashmeya Muhsin Hussein addresses trade unionists in Basra, Iraq, in 2005. They met to plan opposition to oil privatization.

Iraq was to control the flow of oil,” she said. “To have oil workers themselves here reminds us of that. At some point the fighting will end. And then we’re left with the question of who controls the oil and

who benefits from the profits. Oil workers are key in making sure the Iraqi people do.”

**“The occupation is the root of violence in Iraq.”**

Cagan said UFPJ supported the tour of Iraqi labor leaders because for many Americans “the notion that there are real live human beings over there is a distant one.” She said Hussein and Umara “humanized everything,” and she hopes their presence encourages union members to adopt a stronger antiwar position. “So few Americans have traveled to Iraq and so few Iraqis travel here,” she said. “These kinds of trips make it possible to think about how we build coordinated efforts, solidarity, and link our

protests. US Labor Against the War deserves a lot of credit for working through all the difficulties to actually get these folks here.”

Local 1180 second vice president Bill Henning, who helped to found US Labor Against the War, seconded Cagan’s assessment of the importance of meeting Iraqi labor activists in person. “At a time when Congress is debating tepid resolutions calling for partial troop withdrawal, it was critical for us to hear from Iraqi workers asking us to keep up the demand to end the occupation and withdraw all US troops now,” he said. “We need to bring the resources that are being squandered in Iraq home to take care of pressing social needs in this country, instead of fattening war profiteers like Halliburton.”

### Resistance

The tour took Umara and Hussein to meet with union mem-

bers in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Atlanta and seven other cities, and to meet with members of Congress in Washington, DC. It was at a stop in Berkeley, California, that Umara got word that the oil workers in his union had won on their key demands. Debate on the oil law will be postponed until October, and before then a committee of labor leaders will meet with members of the government to discuss every objection the union has to the law, such as profiteering by foreign corporations, the way contracts are awarded, and the distribution of Iraq’s share of oil profits. This despite enormous pressure from Washington, DC, on Prime Minister Maliki to pass the bill.

If the negotiations break down before October and the oil law passes as originally drafted, that’s not the end of the story. “We are the ones who run the pumps to the ports and we also control the ports,” Umara told reporters at a June 18 press conference at 1199 SEIU. “If the law passes, our union will take a strong position against it. One thing we might do is stop the flow of oil.” Hussein, electrical workers president, then added, “The electrical industry supplies power to the oil fields, and they will act in solidarity with the oil workers in opposing passage of this law.”

—Esther Kaplan

## The cost of the war in Iraq

(as of the end of June 2007)

**US troops dead: 3,574**

**US troops injured: 26,558**

**Iraqis dead: estimates range from 67,000 to 601,000**

**Cost to US taxpayers: \$440 billion**