

A Better World Can Be Made By Workers

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A BETTER WORLD CAN BE MADE BY WORKERS

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Why an International Workers' Conference in Iraq?

By Toma Hamid

Because the situation in Iraq and worldwide demands it.

In Iraq a fierce battle has been going on over the past few months. On the one hand there is the government backed by the occupation which is trying to implement the policies and dictates of the World Monetary Fund . And on the one hand there is the working class struggling to improve its situation and preserve its gains.

The government is doing its best to privatize the economy including basic services like running water, electricity, health and education. It is moving to end subsidies for the purchase of basic commodities and services including water, electricity, fuel and staple food items provided through remnants of the old "Oil for Food" Program. It is sacking workers employed in Iraq's large public sector by claiming that it needs to restructure industry and the economy, make things work "smarter", reduce "unnecessary" costs, limit the role of the state in the economy and open Iraq for foreign capital including vitals sectors like oil and other raw materials.

The government is trying

to achieve these goals while keeping wages down to the bare minimum. In attempting to implement its policies the government is making use of rules and regulations introduced under Saddam Hussein. Some of the most pernicious of these are the "public sector" laws which deny the existence of working class and deny workers the right to belong to a union and to take industrial action. The government is also attempting to reintroduce "yellow unions" (i.e. either run by the state or by people pledged not to strike) to prevent unity among workers and mobilizing sectarian militias who pose as police and national guards to oppress any resistance and protest.

The current global economic crisis increases the need for cheap labor especially in a country like Iraq. This will necessitate a drive towards a **dictatorial regime in Iraq and more draconian laws and practices aimed at making the working class pay for a crisis that is not of their own making.**

On the other hand, the working class represented by its trade union federations like the General Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq-GFWCUI, the Iraqi

Federation of South Oil Unions-FSOU and the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq-FWCUI is fighting against the attacks of the government and ruling class .

In some cases real gains have been made.

In fact the struggle of the working class in Iraq has moved up a notch since August 2008, not just because the protests, strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins are bigger in size and there's better coordination among workers of different working places and sectors, both within cities and city-to-city.

But this new wave of protests proves that the working class in Iraq is active and a force which must be reckoned with when it comes to major decisions concerning society.

The working class and its leadership (or at least a segment of it) has a clear understanding of the political reasons behind the government's attacks and the connection to the policies of the occupation and the interests of the international corporations. More importantly, the working class has made some clear political demands,

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An open letter to defenders of working class

With the world financial crisis deepening every day, working people everywhere are being subjected to increasing oppression and marginalization. If they are allowed to get away with it, the capitalist class will make sure that the working class bear the consequences of this crisis and that their reorganized economy will be even more exploitative and deliver even higher profits. The financial crisis which shock up the global economy will undoubtedly leave negative impact on toilers and workers. The working class will be subjected to a new level of exploitation and oppression

The working class in Iraq is the focus of a major global event: the invasion and occupation of Iraq and its enormous consequences. As workers in Iraq fight for their rights, workers everywhere will be affected.

A preparatory committee was formed to hold the 2009 International Labour Conference of Iraq in order to address the matters which concern the working class. The aim is to assist the working class to mobilize its forces effectively against those who endanger its interests and wish to expropriate its legitimate

rights

We, the Preparatory Committee for holding the 2009 International Labour Conference in Iraq, believes that international labour organizations together with labour leaders and activists worldwide are a force with significant weight and influence to assist in building solidarity and consolidating the gains of workers in Iraq. **It also thinks that it is necessary but obligatory to unite the ranks and create opportunities to achieve working class's unity so that it succeeds in its just struggle.**

We call on you to join forces with us... to OPPOSE the projects of the occupation...

to OPPOSE the pillage of the country... to OPPOSE increased exploitation of the working class and the expropriation of its rights... and to SUPPORT the basic right of Iraq's trade unions to act freely and independently... a right which is guaranteed by international conventions and accepted as normal in many parts of the world, but which are being challenged by the government and the occupation here.

We call on you to join forces with workers in Iraq and their revolutionary unions to stand up to the threat of privatization which is not

only the theft of publicly-owned resources by private corporations but also creates mass unemployment.

We call on you to support the 2009 International Workers' Conference in Iraq to strengthen the workers' movement worldwide and begin a real workers' solidarity. Let's fight for international workers' solidarity so we can defeat the corporate mafias and their attempts to pillage public resources. .

We believe the success of the 2009 International Workers' Conference in Iraq is a big challenge and an important step to stop inhumane measures against working class. It is a step toward uniting the workers' movement here and, in so doing, strengthen our class in every country.

It will be a serious blow to big capital and a major gain for workers everywhere.

Support and stand by your conference, support the 2009 International Workers' Conference. Let's make it a beginning for a new rise by the working class.

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To:**The Members of the Preparatory Committee 2009 International Labour Conference in Erbil-Iraqi Kurdistan****Dear Comrades**

With utmost respect and pleasure, I received your precious letter which gave me the honour to be the member of your Preparatory Committee. In the beginning I announce my acceptance of this duty. I will spare no effort to support you and work relentlessly on daily basis in any labour, national and human task.

Dear friends,

Trust me I need no invitation; I have been watching the activity of our hero workers. I am with them with my conscious and all my force.

I have received your precious invitation in spirit of struggle continuity from generation to generation in this difficult time which passes on our nation, people and in particular our workers. Your letter is very expressive as the decision to invite me is taken in the "vast" city of Basra in the south of the country while the invitation is to the "beloved" city of Erbil in the Iraqi Kurdistan in

the north. This is the Iraqi revolutionary spirit!

Your invitation not only provoked the memories of establishing the Oil Workers' Union and the honour to head the General Federation of Trade Unions in Iraq. But it also, before anything else, opened before me the glorious chapters of the Iraqi workers' struggle as if they are taking place today including :Karobaghi, Kethre, oil, docks, railways and many other battles and even today's glories against the occupation, and to protect national wealth and dignity and the people's unity and the unity of its courageous segment, the Iraqi working class.

I am always with you, my brothers and sons and daughters of my hero, proud and patient people.

Your comrade

Ara ghajador

Prague

10th November 2008

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stood firm and shown that it is not a passive layer but an active force that can and will intervene in shaping the future of society.

The most recent wave of protests was triggered by the government's decision to slash the wages of the millions of workers employed in the state -owned sector by the Industry Ministry. The workers' immediate demands include:

* wage increases

* payment of overdue and unpaid wages and allowances

* abolish the 30% wage cut

Their political demands include:

* an end to corruption.

* charge corrupt officials.

* no privatization especially of major commodities like oil and raw materials.

* ignore the dictates of the IMF.

* abolish the so-called Iraq petroleum law.

* tear up the US-Iraq treaty.

The working class was able in large part to ignore attempts to whip up ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraqi society by the reactionary militias. The working class was able to push the danger of sectarian and ethnic wars away.

“We need the support of workers in other countries because we are fighting both local and international opponents”

Interview with Faleh Abod Immara (FAI), deputy president, Central Council of Iraqi Oil Unions.

Faleh was born in 1958 in the southern Iraq city of Basra . He is a long time trade unionist and respected leader amongst oil workers.

Q: Why have you decided to organize the 2009 International Workers’ Conference in Iraq ? What you want the conference to achieve for the Iraqi working class?

Faleh: The decision to organize the conference was taken because of the outright oppression and marginalization practiced by the authorities against the unions in Iraq . We want to inspire Iraqi workers. We want them to be proud of their unions and to step up the fight to have all union activity recognized. This conference is also held to help unite the Iraqi unionist movement because they are amongst the most well established and militant unions in the world.

Q: Do you think this conference will achieve some international goals? For example, establishing the basis for cooperation between workers in Iraq and workers’ organizations and their leaders in other countries?

Faleh: Our union is already engaged in working with related

unions overseas. We are hoping that some of our experiences can be made use of by other unions in Iraq to create their own international links. I personally hope this conference will be a departure point for more solidarity work.

Q: When and where is the conference to be held?

Faleh: It will be held in February 2009 in Erbil in northern Iraq (Kurdistan region). If we cannot get the approval of the authority in the Kurdistan region, we will hold the conference in Istanbul , Turkey .

Q: What kind of support are you hoping to get from workers and their leaders in other countries?

Faleh: We really need workers around the world to show solidarity with Iraqi workers, because the situation here is extremely difficult. We are fighting against local and international opponents. We want the workers around the world to support us materially and morally.

Q: Will you invite guests from abroad? And, if so, on what basis will you select these invitees?

Faleh: Guests from other countries will be invited to attend. We will ask people who have a track record of supporting issues that are important to Iraqi workers. This is what I asked during the

first meeting of the Preparatory Committee. Opposing the occupation, for example is important for us.

Q: Have you faced any technical problems in the lead-up to the conference? If so, what sort of problems? And are there things that workers’ organizations, leaders and activists in other countries can do to help overcome such problems?

Faleh: We face many logistical and technical problems. However I am confident that we will overcome them. Workers and the leaders of their organizations should do as much as possible to make this conference a success because it is the first of its type not only in Iraq but also in the whole of the Middle East . We need:

- financial support
- we want them to send delegates. I should add that there will be simultaneous translators to other languages.

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A successful Iraq conference will send a message of defiance to ALL expropriators.

Let’s join forces!

Long live working class unity!

The Preparatory Committee for holding the 2009 International Labour Conference of Iraq, 21st November 2008.

Workers' campaigns you may not have seen coverage of

In early August, the Minister of Finance Jabir Solaqh announced that the wages of all workers employed by the Industrial Ministry would be cut by 30 per cent. In Iraq many industries including the manufacture of household items, trucks and pharmaceuticals plus building construction, the extractive industries and road building are state owned. This dramatic reduction in their wages affected the livelihoods of millions of workers and their families.

Anger amongst workers was immediate and widespread.

A number of peak union bodies including the General Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq launched a campaign to defeat this resolution. Union called for strikes and sit-ins at many factories, companies and workplaces controlled by the Industrial Ministry.

The protest actions first erupted in Baghdad where many thousands of workers in cotton, leather, oil, and tobacco industries participated. It quickly spread to other cities around the country. Large demonstrations were also organized in Nasyria, Kut, Basra and Najaf.

Workers were determined to demonstrate, strike and sit-in until the Ministry's plan to cut wages was scrapped. Union activists called on

workers in other sectors to join an open strike and thus a general strike across the country was looming.

Workers demanded that:

- * the resolution of the Finance Ministry be repealed and the 30 per cent wage reduction be abolished.

- * that provocations against workers and attacks on their wages and allowances be stopped. In fact, many workers took the opportunity to press for wage increases during these protest actions.

- * back pay for the period during which wages were cut.

- * reinstatement of allowances

Political demands began to emerge too. These were some of the demands:

- * the Iraqi government stop its attempts to privatize industries (especially oil) and not carry out this and other policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

- * there be freedom of organization for all unions including those covering workers in the public sector

- * an end to interference by the government in workers' affairs.

- * wages withheld from as far back as April 2003 be paid as it was through no fault of their own that workers had not turned up for work: it was the US occupation and the Iraqi government itself

which had prevented workers from getting to their workplaces.

- * abolition of the policy of self-finance: financing must be central.

- * wages of workers sacked for political reasons be paid and that they be allowed to return to their jobs

- * an end to corruption

- * sack the financial Minister.

On 11th August thousands of workers from General Union of Mechanics, General Union of Electrical Technicians, Transport Union, Union of Municipal workers, the Bureau to Unite Unionist Work in Iraq and a Services Union participated in a demonstration in al-Tahrir Square in Baghdad.

They demanded that the Finance Minister be sacked.

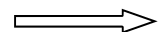
On 20th August thousands of workers from the General Company of Mechanical Industries demonstrated in front of their factory.

On 24th August sit-ins were organized in various industrial sectors.

On 24th August over a thousand workers from various enterprises run by the Industrial and Mineral Ministry demonstrated in front of the Finance Ministry,

On 24th August thousands of workers from cotton, leather, oil and tobacco industries organized sit-ins at their workplaces.

On 25th August many hundreds of workers from leather, wool, battery, cotton and tobacco factories and from electricity generation and



→ representatives of many other sectors and working places participated in a gathering at al-Fardoos square in Baghdad despite extremely hot temperature and restrictions by the occupation forces and National Guard. The leaders of this demonstration promised that workers would continue their protests until the Finance Ministry backs down and abolishes its resolution. They called on workers across the country to join the demonstrations and sit-ins.

On 25th August workers in textile factories in the city of Kut (which employ 7000) launched a sit-in at the company's head office and stopped the work in all parts of the company.

On 25th August workers in Nasyria including workers in aluminum, cable and textile factories (were 5000 worker work) organized gatherings inside the factories and stopped work in all sections.

On 26th August a demonstration was organized in front of the Finance Ministry. The first round of negotiations failed.

The leaders of the demonstration called for a repeat of this action in front of the Industrial Ministry on 31st August. The Ministry asked for the demonstration to be postponed meanwhile arranging a meeting between the heads of companies and representatives of workers on Sunday, the day of the demonstration was to have been held.

The meeting went ahead at the Ministry's offices. The following promises

were made:

- Scrap the wage cut for workers in the industrial sector
- Back pay for wages lost during the period of time the ruling applied
- Formation of a committee to decide on danger allowances

Thus the main demands were achieved.

After these strikes and demonstrations by the workers of the industrial sector which involved all companies and the prospect of a general strike the Finance Ministry accepted the demands of the workers. It sent an order to all companies to pay full wages without any deductions.

On 25th September many hundreds of workers in the electricity sector in Basra participated in a demonstration and marched across the city towards government buildings. Many unions participated in this demonstration including the Electricity Union Demands were:

- Workers employed on a daily basis to be made permanent.
- Reform the Electricity Ministry
- Pay all wages for both permanent and casual workers on fixed dates
- Develop the electricity sector so that it can produce adequate power to meets the demands of the citizens.

Basra's electricity workers have organized many demonstrations through the year. They were well organized and had very large attendances.

A demonstration was held in Nasyria on 25th September by electricity workers. Their demands:

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* sack the Electricity Minister

* end widespread corruption

* improve the efficiency and safety of power stations (many workers have died due to old and outmoded equipment being used in power generation)

* improve the living and working conditions of workers: a proper wage for all

* an end to long term casual contracts.

On 28th August workers of cement industry in Suleimanya demonstrated against shutting down their factories. They succeeded in their struggle.

On 29th September workers in a clothing factory in Najaf demonstrated against poor working conditions and for back pay for wages cut since 2007. Two women workers had lost their lives in the factory in the week prior to the demonstration due to poor working conditions. The demonstrators demands:

- sack the managers
- improve working conditions: workers now have to do their jobs in poorly ventilated halls
- an end to insulting behaviour by supervisors
- an end to corruption
- administration to listen to workers and their complaints
- pay danger and professional allowances.