

The third camp, Iraqi trade unions and the resistance

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The leaders of the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) argue socialists should not fight for the withdrawal of US and UK troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. It claims that, were the occupation to end immediately, the Iraqi labour movement would be annihilated by reactionary Islamic forces.

At a recent AWL day school, one of its leading members, Mark Osborne, specifically claimed that Moqtada al-Sadr had a policy of "killing trade unionists".

Curious to know whether there was any truth in this claim, Simon Hardy contacted Iraqi exile and activist Sami Ramadani for his thoughts. Sami replied quickly, exploding the argument of the AWL that the occupying forces provide any cover for the Iraqi labour movement. With thanks to Sami, we publish his reply here.

Letter to Simon Hardy

Dear Simon,

Strikes were always crushed under Saddam. But in a fascist-style move, Saddam Hussein in 1987 introduced a new law (known as decree 150) declaring all public sector workers, i.e. the overwhelming majority of Iraq's several million workers, "civil servants". And guess what? Civil servants were banned from joining a trade union. Overnight, most of Iraq's workers were not allowed to join even Saddam's own yellow unions.

After the occupation, [US Administrator of Iraq] Paul Bremer decreed that Saddam's decree 150 was still in force. It is the only Saddam law that was ever specifically declared valid by the occupation regime. Furthermore, no trade unions, yellow or red, are legal in Iraq today, until such time that the government "enacts a law which will govern the status of all associations".

That some unions are operating is due to the determination of the workers to defend the most basic of their rights. The Federation of Iraqi Oil Unions, headquartered in Basra, is the shining example of such a union.

It is despicable of the Alliance for Workers Liberty to absolve the occupation and accuse the Sadr movement of assassinating trade unionists. It is the occupation tanks, jets and police-state tactics, which are trying to crush the struggle of Iraq's working class and its trade unions. Like you, I don't have any illusions about Sadr, but one has to base one's analysis of Iraq on the facts and not on a pack of lies.

It was no accident that the province, which was least controlled by the US-led occupation and the puppet regime, developed into the hub of independent trade unionism. Not a single trade unionist was killed by the Sadr movement in Basra, a city that they mainly controlled.

It was the British forces, which opened fire last year on a well-known union office in Basra. And it was the occupation, which was accused by the unions of the assassination of an oil engineer last year.

During the past several months, occupation forces have encircled and threatened striking workers, and the oil and port workers' union officials have been threatened with arrest and physical liquidation by the regime and its agents. I do know that these unions have members and officials, who support the Sadr movement, though they certainly do not have a majority or control these unions.

While these unions were threatened by pro-regime militias (such as those of the pro-occupation Islamic Supreme Council), they have never reported being threatened by the Sadr supporters. With the occupation and the regime tightening their grip on Basra, trade unionists are fearing the worst and are calling on workers across the world to stand by Iraq's workers in their struggle.

The main aspect of the Sadr movement's activities, which did attract a lot of hostility from people in Basra and Baghdad, was their attempts to make women wear the hijab. But countless thousands of women in Baghdad and Basra continued to assert and exercise their right to wear or not wear the hijab. Reports in the media that they barred girls from going to school or women to university are false, and form part of a propaganda onslaught to justify the killing and crushing of the Sadr supporters.

Currently, among the Sadr movement's most outspoken cadres are their several women members of parliament. Yesterday [27 April] they led 50 members of parliament into the besieged Sadr City in an attempt to stop the US planes from bombarding the city.

Last but not least, the US, British and regime forces besieging and bombarding Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad, have killed or injured thousands of people in the past weeks alone. Aren't some of these workers or trade unionists? Or, as far as the AWL is concerned, they don't count because they are being killed or maimed by the occupation?

Best wishes,

Sami

Jeremy Dewar, editor of Workers Power, adds

Break the siege of Sadr City

The US army and Iraqi government onslaught against those Shia areas that support Moqtada al-Sadr has been going on relentlessly since 25 March. The siege is comparable to that laid against Fallujah in 2004. Azzaman news reports 800 (mainly civilians) killed, and 1,800 wounded in just a three-week period.

US troops have built a wall to divide Sadr City in two, and have opened fire on women and children. They have reportedly used "fissile" weapons that are banned because their plutonium and enriched uranium shells cause leukemia and foetal deformities.

Iraqi MP Dr Maha al-Dori told al-Jazeera: "The hospitals are jammed with dead bodies - The occupation forces completely ban and open fire at any convoy trying to deliver humanitarian aid."

Irin news agency reports: "Garbage lies piled up in the streets, sewage channels are clogged, and drinking water is contaminated with sewage, producing an overpowering stench." The bombing of the Jamilia market has, according to the Red Cross, caused food shortages and a humanitarian crisis.

The antiwar and trade union movements should follow the example of the US dockers' union ILWU, which

took strike action on 1 May to demand the immediate withdrawal of all US troops. Youth and students should call for British army recruiters to be banned from classrooms and campuses. Socialists and democrats worldwide should declare our unconditional support for all those fighting US and British troops in Iraq.

Iraqi workers strike on May Day

Since Sami's letter, Iraqi trade unions have responded magnificently to the US dockworkers' call for an international "No Peace No Work Holiday" on May Day. At the same time that our American brothers and sisters shut down the US West Coast ports for a day, the General Union of Port Workers in Iraq took one hour's strike action at Umm Qasr and Khor Al Zubair dockyards.

Both sets of workers were united in their demand for the immediate withdrawal of all occupation forces.

The Iraqi workers' action is even more courageous in that it came when the US is laying a murderous siege on Sadr City, Basra and Nasiriyah, killing over 1,000.

The broader Iraqi trade union movement also responded to the US union's appeal. Over 20 unions, headed by the oil workers, signed a statement, appealing for "support for our struggle for freedom from occupation both military and economic" and demanding "self-determination free of all foreign interference".

Just in case Mark Osborne or any other apologist for imperialism mistook their intention, the workers' leaders spelt it out: "We demand an immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from our country".

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