

Iraq: 'The British army is just another militia'

Kamil Mahdi interviewed by Liv Lewitschnik

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Daily the media tells us about clashes between “insurgents” and Western troops in Iraq. We hear less about the unarmed resistance which is fighting the occupation with strikes and workplace walkouts. The General Union of Oil Employees in Basra (GUOE), or Basra Oil Union as it is commonly referred to, is in many respects leading in that struggle - continuously opposing international corporations that want to take over the national oil industry.

Kamil Mahdi is an Iraqi lecturer in the economics of the Middle East at Exeter University. He saw at first hand how strong labour resistance in Iraq is when he went to the GUOE's second anti-privatisation conference in August: “There is a great deal of commitment to the idea that political issues are not swept under the carpet. The oil workers do not believe that it is in their or the oil industry's interests to be handed over to foreign companies.”

The GUOE was set up in the wake of the invasion three years ago and now represents 23,000 workers employed by nine Iraqi oil companies in Amara, Nassriyah, Anbar and Basra provinces. In 2003 they stopped Dick Cheney's company KBR (a subsidiary of Halliburton) from taking over their workplaces, and defied a new wage system instituted by Paul Bremer's administration, with a three-day strike. In late August 2006 GUOE won a number of demands following a walkout by 700 workers in Basra and Nassriyah.

The International Monetary Fund is backing a new oil resources law which would give free rein to foreign corporations over Iraq's oil. Mahdi says that while fighting for workers' rights is important to the GUOE, it is the preservation of the national oil industry that is foremost in their minds: “There is an existing national oil industry and it has continued to work and develop production under very difficult circumstances of war and sanctions. Industries have been attacked, bombed, and received no investment. The efforts of thousands of workers have kept the oil industry going, and their experience of companies brought in by the occupation to take over the management of the industry is completely negative.”

Strength on the ground

The workers' efforts also prove that they are perfectly capable of running the oil industry on their own terms, even if technical and economic assistance is needed. According to Madhi, “The workers are able to manage the industry themselves. They can decide what is needed in terms of technical expertise and investment to develop the current and future oilfields - even when this is through service contracts with other companies, both domestic and foreign. But they will not allow production sharing with foreign companies because this would become a new form of the concession

system.”

Although the Iraqi government formulates social and economic policies behind closed doors, it takes note of GUOE because, in Mahdi’s words, “the union has shown that it has strength on the ground in mobilising people for or against policies.” Basra oil workers are also raising awareness about labour and economic issues within the wider community. Through their contacts with political groups, other trade unions and the international anti-war movement, GUOE’s president Hassan Jumaa spoke both at the Marxism 2006 event this summer and at the International Peace Conference in London last December where he stressed the union’s support for the Iraqi resistance’s campaign to drive the occupiers out of Iraq. They did this because they believe the future of Iraq is at stake if the military occupation becomes an economic one.

In Basra the British occupation is now more precarious than ever, says Mahdi. The security situation has got worse since the occupation because the British military effectively ignore crime and cannot effect the dynamics of militia politics. Mistrust for the British army is growing in tandem with new revelations of military brutality towards both the civilian population and suspected resistance fighters.

He says, “The British presence in Basra is really isolated now. Of course it is a major military force, but it is isolated politically. The British army is just another militia in Basra - it cannot ever play a positive role in political development. It is an occupation army that is not even in control of the area.”

Despite the situation on the ground, workers are showing remarkable solidarity and resilience. The anti-privatisation conference and the union’s continuing campaigning are testimony to that. As part of standing up for workers’ rights the union is campaigning to ensure that the government implements the better wages and workers’ housing they won during the August strike. The union’s main task is fighting to keep the Iraqi oil industry under Iraqi control rather than have it stolen by US multinationals under the protection of military occupation.

P.S.

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