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Iraq

Oil Workers' Union Confronts Occupation and Privatization

- News from around the world -

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Organising over 23,000 workers in the Iraq's southern oil and gas industries, the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) is struggling against both the US/UK occupation and the corporate-led privatisation of Iraq's industry.

The forerunner to the GUOE was the Southern Oil Company Union (SOCU), founded in May 2003 by worker activists from the Southern Oil Company. This and other unions from Amara, Basra and Nassiriyah provinces, have now merged to form the GUOE. This union remains technically illegal, but President Hassan Jumaa states:

â€œWe take our legitimacy from the workers'

Position on the Occupation

â€œIt is a deep and patriotic feeling of all the union's members that the occupation forces must leave the country immediately, whatever the consequences'. Hassan Jumaa: â€œOnly a mercenary benefiting from the occupation would want it to continue any longer'.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/GUOEpic.jpg>]

Position on Privatisation

â€œThe privatisation of the oil and industrial sectors is the objective of all in the Iraqi state/government. We will stand firm against this imperialist plan that would hand over Iraq's wealth to international capitalism such that the deprived Iraqi people would not benefit from it...we are taking this path for the sake of Iraq's glory even if it costs us our lives. Iraqis are capable of managing the their companies and their investments by themselves'

Position on political Independence

'The GUOE in Basra is an independent union, not linked in the present phase to any [union] confederation.

Position on the previous regime

GUOE executive committee members, including its President, were part of the active opposition against Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, and many were imprisoned by the regime. The union has an ongoing battle with Ba'ath loyalist managers, and publicly opposes their continued presence in positions of authority, in particular in the oil industry.

The GUOE needs your solidarity and support

Naftana (Arabic: 'our oil'), is the GUOE's UK support committee. To sign up for our alerts, please send an email to: naftana-subscribe@lists.riseup.net . These are sent every month or so, and keep supporters informed of strikes, and other union activities. If you also send your mobile phone number, we will add you to the urgent alerts list, which will be used to mobilise protests in the event of attacks on GUOE members.

See also the union's home page for regular news updates

www.basraoilunion.org

Time line of events

May 2003

The US Company Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) were kicked out of workplaces and their subcontracted labour rejected. The newly formed Southern Oil Company Union (SOCU) saw KBR as 'part of the invasion and occupation' an extension of the American army' and 'spies' and as a result barred them from all oil sector sites.

June 2003

Strike at Basra Oil Refinery in Sheiba. Workers had not been paid their wages since the invasion and occupation in March. Humiliated by having to report to KBR, 100 worker activists blockaded the road in front of the refinery and confronted British troops in a five-hour stand-off. Negotiations with Occupation authorities resulted in workers winning their wages within the day.

August 2003

A two-day strike was held, with oil exports halted. The demands of the strikers focused on unpaid wages. This display of union muscle paid off when it came to negotiating over the wage table (see below).

August 2003

Iraqi Drilling Company workers repaired first drilling rig by the end of this month. They rebuild eleven more over the coming months, using little more than their ingenuity and spare parts from the local legal and black markets. SOCU workers have consistently carried out autonomous reconstruction, including at Khor Al Omayeh offshore terminal; the Lehees crude oil Pumping Station; North Rumeilla crude oil pumping station, drilling and gas company.

December 2003

The SOCU executive committee drafted a workers wage table of their own, in response to the Occupation's 'Order 30' wage table, which had been passed in September 2003. The union's table takes into account rising rent, food and fuel prices. Negotiations ensued with the Ministry of Oil after the Union threatened general strike action. Workers were ready to defend their workplaces by use of armed force if occupation troops tried to take them over.

January 2004

Victory! Higher wages were won for all workers in the SOCU - the minimum wage is now 102,000 Iraqi Dinar rather than 69,000. Two whole levels of the occupation-imposed wage table have been eliminated.

February 2004

Basra Pipeline Company workers take strike action on the day the Minister of Oil visited. They demanded that Hassan Jumaa should negotiate on their behalf. Exports were shut down for at least four hours. Workers also demand the same wages as in the SOC.

June 2004

Following a meeting of union council leaders in the nine companies in the southern Iraqi oil sector, the General Union of Oil Employees (GUOE) was born. It comprises workers in the Southern Oil Company, Southern Gas Company, Southern Refinery Company, Iraqi Drilling Company, the Oil Carrier Company, the Gas Packing Company, the Oil Production Company, the Oil Projects Company, and the Oil Pipe Lines Company.

August 2004

The Southern Oil Company HQ was bombed. The union denounced the use of bombings to take issue with company management.

March 2005

An assassination attempt (by car bomb) was made against Samir Yasin Sabbah, leader of a local GUOE-affiliated union in the town of Fao. The attack was attributed to members of the former regime involved in the lucrative oil smuggling racket.

May 2005

The GUOE held an historic anti-privatisation conference in Basra, attended by hundreds of local trade unionists, plus international delegates from US Labor Against War, Iraq Occupation Focus, PLATFORM and Jubilee Iraq. Unions and peace organizations from Korea to Argentina send messages of solidarity.

June 2005

Protest strike action was held at Basra Oil refinery. Management was excluded from the site by workers. Their demands focused on allocation of land for employees, higher wages, for the 20 per cent of oil revenues currently directed to the Ministry of Defence to be abolished, for more oil revenue to be ploughed back into the local economy, and for Saddamist managers and Ministry of Oil figures to be sacked.

July 2005

Oil exports were cut for 24 hours after negotiations with Minister of Oil fail to bear fruit. While the media reported that the union took strike action 'in support' of the Governor of Basra, the union stressed its own independence, and that its own interests caused it to take action (as stated in June)