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ByMute Editor

With Iraq transformed into a vast Free Trade (War) Zone, how are unionised workers fighting back against the occupation's neo-Ba'athist regime? Ewa Jasiewicz, who recently returned from eight months working with human rights groups, families, Palestinian refugees, women's groups and trade unions in Baghdad and Basra, reports

In order to understand the present state of workers' resistance in occupied Iraq we have to begin with the old regime. The Ba'ath dictatorship exterminated workers – both literally and ideologically. In 1987 Saddam liquidated all trade unions, transforming all workers into civil servants – state employees. Fake Ba'athist unions were set up, functioning in effect as tools of surveillance, repression and murder. But this denial of the existence of workers and repression of labour organisation did not end with the fall of Saddam. In June 2003 the US occupation administration passed its infamous 'Public Notice on Organisation in the Workplace'. This innocuous sounding document effectively perpetuated the 1987 law: unions were still illegal and would not be recognised until 'The Iraqi people' – i.e. the puppet Governing Council – passed its new labour law. The Ba'athist managerial class, restored to their posts by the occupation, implemented the 'Public Notice' like an order: organisation in the workplace was still illegal. Bosses would look smarmily baffled when asked about workers' rights and workers' organisations, responding 'But we do not have workers, only employees.'

Workers across Iraq ignored the notice and began forming unions and collectives while taking direct action against their recycled Ba'athist bosses.

At the Southern Oil Company (SOC) – Iraq's industrial and economic backbone and the biggest oil company in the country – workers physically threw out their bosses, killing those who, under the Ba'athist regime, were responsible for killing their comrades. However, the current Ministry of Oil, with the protection of the occupation, had the surviving bosses returned to their former positions, albeit reshuffled from North to South or vice-versa. Despite the reshuffle this was a clear attempt to ensure the continuity of repression in Iraq.

Other bureaucratic attempts to put down resistance have followed. In January 2004 the Governing Council responded to the working class's ungovernability by naming the Communist Party-dominated Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) as the 'official and sole representatives of the Iraqi workers movement', shoehorning the diverse, and in many ways contradictory movement into a single body. The Communist Party has a representative in the Governing Council and many feel it is already capitulating to the occupation in order to build its influence in the new regime. While there is a counterweight to the IFTU in the form of The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (set up by The Worker Communist Party of Iraq and comprising the Union of the Unemployed), the Governing Council have decided to officially ignore them.

Over and above such external repression of labour organisation, the biggest obstacle to workers' resistance is the legacy of the Ba'ath dictatorship. The regime cultivated a vitiating inter-generational social psychosis based on fear. Trust – the key building block for any collective action and solidarity – was demolished. There were five intelligence agencies in the Ba'ath security apparatus and a third of the population was employed in some kind of surveillance or security capacity, whether soldiers, police officers, intelligence agents or loyalists writing reports on their neighbours or co-workers; children were instructed to spy on their parents. Over 10,000 of these intelligence agents have been retrained and re-absorbed into the occupation's security apparatus for the sake of repression as usual.

Workers' struggle under Saddam took the form of discussion and planning for the future, keeping dreams and solidarity alive rather than attempting any strike activity, which would mean certain death. The mass nature of heavy industry, particularly in the sprawling oil sector, meant that such workplaces were like mini-societies, producing networks for a potential civil society in a country where no civil society existed – only the Ba'ath party. In such a concentration of human contact there was hope and possibility for clandestine organising and relationship building. Again the Southern Oil Company (SOC) trade union is a case in point. The leadership, although it contains Communist Party members, is mostly organised around religious affinity and old Daawa Party (Iraq's most long-standing Shia party) relations. Broadly speaking it is a secular union but Islamic in character. It owes its success to the solidarity networks of oil workers whose awareness of their own power and value was based on the oil industry's great economic importance to the dictatorship (a strike would have ended the regime) and the regime's consequent intense repression of the workforce.

Manifesting the great potential as a force of resistance it built up during the Ba'ath regime, the SOC union is now inspiring and empowering workers all over the country by defying the occupation's order 30 on Salaries and Employment Conditions, introduced in September 2003. The Order, a de facto law, established a 13-level wage table which set the minimum monthly wage for all public sector workers at ID69,000 – roughly \$45. This is half the recommended monthly wage of a sweatshop worker in the free trade zones of neighbouring Iran. Average monthly rent is ID50,000 per month, cooking gas fluctuates wildly (ID500 last June, ID12,000 by August), and food, clothing and medicine prices have all risen.

The SOC union created its own wage-table in accordance with market prices, more than doubling the wage ordained by the occupation, setting the minimum at ID155,000 per month. The union threatened to join the resistance and go on armed strike if their demands were not met. ID102,000 per month was the final amount negotiated plus risk and location payments, amounting to a third of each monthly wage. This was applied to the entire oil sector and was hailed by the union as a massive victory and the first step to many more.

As well as fighting the occupation, workers have been sustaining what remains of Iraq's infrastructure. Iraqi workers know their workplaces best, having kept their industries going using spare parts from local markets and their own ingenuity during 13 years of the harshest sanctions ever passed. Haarthra electricity plant is a case in point. Built by Japanese giant Mitsubishi in the 1970s, the plant was bombed intensely during both Gulf wars and is currently running at 25 percent capacity – a miracle in itself and testament to worker creativity in cannibalising spare parts from other defunct generators. Mitsubishi owns the plans, drawings, and parts for Haarthra but is refusing to hand them over or to re-enter Iraq for another two years due to the security situation. The free-market imperative and the ownership of the means of reconstruction by multinational corporations is actually the biggest obstacle to redevelopment. As long as the occupation is in power, Iraq will remain at the infrastructural ground zero imposed upon it by the sanctions regime.

All in all, there will be two intifadas in Iraq. One is the current struggle against the US occupation, reduced by the media to the work of 'Islamic Fanatics' of the Mehdi Army fighting for an 'Islamic State' but in reality a generalised, popular, multifaceted and inchoate uprising for national liberation; the other is the mounting internal intifada against the new-old enemy within, the Ba'athist ruling class, recycled into positions of power by the occupation. It was thwarted in 1991 and cut down before it could develop in 1999, but it may yet flower. The intifada – which translates literally as 'shaking off' or uprising – delights and empowers many ordinary people by fighting back so effectively against the occupiers and their Ba'athist stooges (Fallujah is now an autonomous zone). The resistance movement has no bargaining partner and no interest in negotiating social peace with the occupiers. Negotiations would only give way to more compromises and modifications of the existing order rather than

destroying it.

But it would be wrong to dichotomise the social and the armed struggle. The armed resistance is built upon the tribal and social everyday neighbourhood networks in communities, with some experienced, well armed and well funded former Ba'athist military officer leaders – most of whom reject the Ba'ath and Saddam – and Shia groups funded by Iran. By and large the resistance is made up of ordinary people well armed as a result of the proliferation of weapons in Iraq after three wars.

Ideally, oil workers themselves would shut down the oil fields in a collective refusal to be enslaved into – literally – fuelling the occupation. Nevertheless, by starving it of profit the armed attacks on the oil infrastructure are a necessary tactic for the overthrow of the occupation and neo-Ba'athist regime. Those who hold the tools by day may well swap them for RPGs in sabotage actions by night. This activity is ultimately much safer for the whole workforce than a strike which would expose workers to occupation violence as troops' attempt to take over the pumps.

However, the Iraqi working class is not homogeneous. There are also workers who would not want to see the workplaces they have reconstructed with their own hands blown up, their livelihood and their power to strike collectively undermined. Guerrilla attacks, like workers resistance are only a part of the struggle for freedom.

Ewa Jasiewicz <freelance AT mailworks.org> is currently touring the UK organising a network of lawyers to mount legal challenges against military violations in Iraq. She is also helping set up the Iraqi Workers' Solidarity Group which will bring Iraqi trade unionists to the UK and give practical support to Iraqi workers. Her full report on workers' resistance in Iraq 'The Invisible Fire' is in the M-files on [<http://www.metamute.com>]