

How Britain's trade unions support occupation of Iraq

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A row between leaders of several trade unions and the Stop the War Coalition (StWC)—the organisation led by the Socialist Workers Party that came to the head of last year's anti-war movement—sheds light on the criminal role being played by Britain's trade unions in the neo-colonial take-over of Iraq.

On October 20, Mick Rix, former general secretary of the rail union ASLEF and an ostensible “left,” resigned from the StWC's steering committee, accusing the organisation of making “stupid and wild accusations” against representatives of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) of being “collaborators” with the British government and the US-led occupation of Iraq.

One day later, the public sector union Unison threatened to sever its relations with the StWC, condemning its “campaign of vilification against representatives of the IFTU.” A Trades Union Congress statement also attacked “the attempts of a few to prevent the views of Iraqi trade unionists from being heard.”

The unions' complaints centre on the supposed mistreatment of an IFTU representative at the Third Annual European Social Forum (ESF) meeting in London, October 15-17, when some delegates protested at the inclusion of the IFTU's Subji al Mashadani on the platform, causing the meeting to be abandoned.

According to the trade unions, Mashadani's treatment was indicative of the StWC's sectarianism that has led it to oppose the building of independent trade unions in Iraq.

But any objective appraisal of the IFTU's role over the last period proves that the charges made against it of collaborating with the occupation are entirely valid and that Mashadani's appearance at what was billed as an anti-war debate had the character of a deliberate provocation.

The IFTU is led by the Iraqi Communist Party, which participates in the puppet administration set up by the US in Iraq. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the ICP has nothing to do with genuine socialism. As an adherent of the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” and the so-called “two-stage” theory of revolution in the backward and semi-colonial countries—one bourgeois democratic prior to socialism—the ICP has opposed a revolutionary internationalist perspective based on the independent mobilisation of the working class in favour of the accommodation to one or another faction of the national bourgeoisie.

Despite repeated Baathist persecution, the ICP clung to this strategy, participating in the Baathist Party-dominated National Progressive Front (NFP) between 1972 and 1979, when it was involved in repressing the working class and the Kurdish and Shiite population.

Politically compromised by its support for the Ba'athist dictatorship, and subject to persecutions at its hands, the ICP was eventually forced out of power in 1979.

For the ICP, the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime has provided an opportunity for it to reestablish its position in the corridors of power. The fact that “regime change” was achieved by US imperialism, as part of

its efforts to re-subjugate the Iraqi people and seize the country's oil reserves, count for little in the ICP's calculations.

Even as US-led forces lay waste to Iraq, wiping out towns and cities and killing countless civilians, the ICP and the IFTU that it heads seek to legitimise the puppet government of Iyad Allawi. Whilst formally opposing the occupation, the ICP/IFTU claim that January's elections are vital in establishing “democracy” in Iraq and nothing must be done to jeopardise them. In this deliberately distorted presentation, US and British troops are the guarantors of “national sovereignty” and even of workers' rights, and those opposing their efforts to impose colonial style rule are the enemies of the Iraqi people.

There is nothing original in the ICP/IFTU claims, which merely repeat the propaganda of the Bush and Blair administrations. And they have been rewarded for their efforts—the ICP holds several posts in the Allawi government, and the IFTU has been recognised as its house trade union.

The trade unions are well aware of the IFTU's unhealthy pedigree. Indeed, they have elected to work with it for precisely this reason. Their objections to Mashadani's treatment are nothing but a smokescreen behind which they are accommodating themselves to a new wave of neo-colonial aggression.

Before the US-led attack on Iraq, the TUC and its left representatives in particular had sought to walk a tightrope between popular opposition to war at home and abroad and its desire to support the government. It issued statements opposing military intervention without United Nations backing, but as soon as the war began, it showed where its true priorities lay—refusing to back the mass anti-war protest on February 15, stating that it would not be part of a movement that it claimed was seeking to drive Prime Minister Tony Blair from office.

Once the occupying forces were in place, the TUC's concern was twofold: to try to dilute public opposition to the US-led takeover, and to ensure that the Blair government was able to use its position as America's ally to ensure British imperialism received a fair share of the spoils of war. The IFTU has become a useful conduit towards both ends.

The TUC web site reports the outcome of a “fact-finding visit” to Iraq between February 14 and 25, 2004, aimed at identifying “developments in the Iraqi labour movement, and to assess what practical support the world trade union movement could provide.”

The TUC report states that the British trade unions and their US counterparts in the AFL-CIO had “resisted suggestions that they should intervene in Iraq unilaterally” on the grounds that this might jeopardise international support for their claims to be acting in the interests of Iraqi workers. But only an appearance to the contrary was created. Their visit was conducted under the auspices of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), but the fact that this organisation functioned as a CIA-backed front during the Cold War makes the TUC and AFL-CIO's attempt to distance themselves from any predatory imperialist designs in Iraq threadbare.

And the TUC makes no effort to conceal that its visit was made with the

blessing and assistance of the occupying powers. “The UK and USA governments provided useful support and assistance for the delegation, including setting up meetings—the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and the future British Ambassador to Iraq were particularly helpful,” it reports.

The small number of workplace visits it conducted were mainly in those areas directly controlled by, and vital to, the occupation—including an oil refinery, two railway depots and the port at Um Qasr. The delegation was involved in talks with what it euphemistically describes as “government organisations”—most notably “Sir Jeremy Greenstock ([Blair’s] special envoy to Iraq); Coalition Provisional Authority officials in Baghdad (Scott Carpenter, an assistance to Ambassador Bremer, and representatives of the USA International Development Department).”

The section dealing with the “current state of the Iraqi labour movement” in the report makes clear that the trade union visit was not in response to any popular demand within Iraq, but as a result of the machinations of US and British imperialism and its stooges within the puppet regime.

It notes that the Baathist regime stamped out any trace of independent working class organisation and that, as a result, the General Federation of Trade Unions that existed under Saddam Hussein was nothing but a front for the dictatorship. “The unions which remained under the GFTU were provided with substantial incomes from compulsory subscriptions deducted from workers’ pay, and developed a large asset base (mostly buildings) in return for which the GFTU acted as a transmission belt to workplaces and workers for Ba’ath Party policies, also acting as ambassadors for the regime globally,” the report states.

As a result, the TUC meeting with “Iraqi trade unionists” consisted of talks with people who, in the main, had been working abroad but returned to the country after the invasion, including the Workers’ Democratic Trade Union Movement, which “initially and sometimes since calling themselves the GFTU...is now generally referred to as the IFTU.”

At the time of its February visit, the TUC reported, “The Iraqi organisations (GFTU, IFTU, FWCTU [Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq]) are all attempting to take over the financial assets, buildings and membership lists of the old GFTU (this is one reason why the IFTU sometimes characterises itself as the GFTU).”

Subsequent events seem to have ensured that it is the IFTU that will gain the lion’s share of any assets to be had. With the FWCTU refusing to work with the Allawi administration, the IFTU has been recognised as the sole national trade union federation in Iraq, and moves are afoot for the IFTU and GFTU to formally merge.

The IFTU claims that its participation in the government will ensure Iraqi workers’ rights. Just how these are to be squared with the military takeover of the country by foreign troops, and with elections instituted entirely at the behest of the occupying powers and preceded by the violent suppression of any resistance in cities such as Fallujah and Mosul, the IFTU does not even attempt to explain.

Rather, much of its attention is focused on the drafting of a new labour code that the IFTU claims will enshrine the right to independent workers’ organisations in Iraq. However, in May, the Coalition Provisional Authority set out that the purpose of the new code was to ensure Iraq’s “transition from a non-transparent centrally planned economy to a free market economy characterised by sustainable economic growth through the establishment of a dynamic private sector, and the need to enact institutional and legal reforms to give it effect.” In short, by revising the 1987 labor code enacted by Saddam Hussein to suppress any form of independent working class organisation, the imperialist powers hope to adapt the structures of dictatorship to further the penetration and takeover of economic life by Western capital.

For its part, the TUC has embraced the IFTU as a means of lending credence to the so-called transition to democracy—for which read

“untrammelled free market capitalism”—so preparing the way for it to end even the pretence of opposition to the imperialist takeover of Iraq. By supporting the IFTU in its lobbying for a revised labour code, the TUC hopes to ensure its own place as an adjunct and advisor to Washington and London as they seek to establish the legal framework to legitimise US and British de facto control over Iraq’s industry and resources.

To this end, the TUC played a leading role in ensuring that the IFTU’s London-based representative Abdullah Muhsin appeared at the Labour Party conference in October to argue in favour of Blair’s insistence that British troops must remain in Iraq.

In an open letter to trade union delegates, Muhsin warned against supporting calls for the immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, arguing that this “would be bad for my country, and would play into the hands of extremists.”

The trade unions utilised this intervention as an excuse to abandon all opposition to Blair, dressing up the conference decision to back the US/British occupation as a victory for the Iraqi working class. In reality, trade union support for the motion was a means of junking its pretence of opposition and calls for an “early withdrawal” of troops, thus signaling to the government and big business that they could rely on the TUC to smooth the way for its neo-colonial ventures.

On October 19, the TUC launched its “Appeal for Iraq,” headed by Labour MP Hilary Benn, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber and Mashadani. Its appeal for “solidarity” funds states that the monies raised will “help pay for organisers to spread the word that unions are no longer an arm of the state.”

This is clearly an expensive campaign to mount, with a large number of organisers.

On October 27, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that the IFTU had approached the British Council for funding from the Department for International Development’s £5 million fund.

The real issue is not that Mushandani received a hostile reception from some of those attending the European Social Forum, but why it ever gave him a platform in the first place.

That it did is the outcome of the ESF and its affiliates’ political prostration before the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The IFTU’s role as an adjunct of the Allawi government had created a dilemma for the StWC, as association with it threatened to discredit its own claim to be opposed to the occupation. Just days before the ESF opened, in an October 11 statement on its web site, the StWC had condemned the IFTU “as the direct instrument of the government and the Labour Party apparatus” for its role in providing a figleaf of credibility to Blair’s claims that the occupation had the endorsement of Iraqi workers.

But whilst the StWC was issuing this condemnation, the ESF, in which the Socialist Workers Party was playing a leading role, had conceded to TUC demands that Mushandani be included on its anti-war platform. This was not only a matter of ensuring TUC funding for the event, but because many of the organisations within the ESF umbrella also support the occupation of Iraq. And for the SWP a conflict with the trade unions was unthinkable—firstly, because of its insistence that the trade unions constitute the foundations for a socialist renewal of the workers’ movement and, secondly, for the more prosaic reason that it would cut across its ongoing efforts to secure a niche for itself as trusted allies of the left flank of the trade union bureaucracy and the numerous social democratic and Stalinist groupings and NGOs that gravitate around the ESF.

Therefore, rather than exposing the criminal character of the TUC’s rush to embrace the IFTU, the StWC statement went on to suggest that the trade unions’ understandable desire “to express their support to the working class of Iraq in its extremely difficult struggles” had made them the unwitting dupes of the IFTU, which was abusing the unions’ “goodwill” to further its own ends.

It is the StWC that is attempting to hoodwink workers as to the real aims and objectives of the trade unions. The record shows that it is the TUC and its US allies who are the major players in Iraq and who have adopted the IFTU precisely because they understand its political intentions very well. Moreover, there is no difference between what the TUC is doing in Iraq and the role it plays in Britain. Its legitimising of colonial conquest is just the flip side of its efforts to enforce the dictates of government and the major corporations at home that have resulted in a precipitous decline in the living standards of the working class and an ongoing erosion of democratic rights.

Despite the trade unions' accusations, the StWC in fact did its best to comply with their wishes, with StWC and SWP leader Lindsey German taking her seat alongside Mushandani on the platform at the ESF.

The StWC's subsequent response to the attack unleashed upon it by the unions has further underscored the opportunist character of its politics—placing its relations with the trade union bureaucracy above all considerations of principle.

Andrew Murray, the StWC chairman and member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, has spoken of his “regret” at Rix’s decision to resign from the coalition, especially as he had “played an important part in winning unions to oppose the war.”

“British politics is in uproar over the redeployment and impending assault on Fallujah,” he said. “It would be dismaying if any affiliates should choose to disengage now because of *secondary* differences which could easily be resolved” (emphasis added).

The relegating of the fundamental question of whether you are for or against the occupation of Iraq to a “secondary” difference prepared the way for a significant shift by the StWC.

In a letter to the Guardian newspaper on October 25, Lindsey German wrote of the StWC, “Our position, which is the same as that adopted at the TUC conference, is that an early date be set for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq.”

The SWP-led StWC is looking to resolve its differences with the TUC by adapting to the latter and rejecting calls for an immediate withdrawal of occupying troops in favour of setting an unspecified “early date.” Having thus effectively abandoned what had been the *raison d’être* of the anti-war movement, one is entitled to ask; Just how much further is the StWC prepared to go to maintain its relations with the union bureaucracy?



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