

Iraqi oil workers strike in Basra

James Cogan
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Some 600 members of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU) who work for the Oil Pipeline Company in the southern city of Basra went on strike on Monday, curtailing the flow of refined petroleum and liquefied gas to Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. The Iraqi government has deployed troops to intimidate the strikers and issued arrest warrants on as many as 10 union leaders. On Wednesday, the IFOU leaders put industrial action “on hold” for five days to enable negotiations with the government.

The strike was triggered by the failure of the Oil Pipeline Company to make a scheduled bonus payment to its workforce. The walkout, however, has been brewing for well over a month. On April 27, the IFOU served the Iraqi government with a 17-point log-of-claims, and nominated May 10 as the deadline for a strike across the oil industry, particularly in the country’s southern provinces.

Desperate to prevent a strike, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed in May to form a joint government-oil company management-union committee to negotiate the IFOU’s claims. Over 50 percent of Iraq’s oil is produced in Basra province alone. Another 10 to 15 percent and a large proportion of the country’s untapped reserves are located in the neighbouring southern provinces of Maysan (capital at Amara), Dhi Qar (capital at Nasiriyah) and Al Muthanna (capital at Samawah).

The union’s demands are wide-ranging and apply to its entire 26,000 membership across Iraq, not only the employees of the Oil Pipeline Company. They cover bonuses, the protection of accumulated vacation time, promotions, full-time positions for temporary workers and jobs for recent graduates of oil industry training courses. Other demands include giving workers ownership of their publicly-owned, rented houses and guaranteed treatment for the workers affected by cancer and other illnesses potentially related to the contamination of southern Iraq by US and British depleted uranium (DU) munitions.

The union is also calling for the repeal of recent increases in the price of fuel; the ending of a 20 percent

levy on oil industry profits to help finance the Iraqi security forces and the right to “study” the US-endorsed draft legislation that would allow foreign companies to enter the Iraqi oil industry. The IFOU is demanding the resignation of the manager of the Oil Pipeline Company.

While many of these demands stem from the conditions of hardship facing the Iraqi working class, the IFOU leadership is exploiting the legitimate grievances of oil workers to advance the interests of a faction of the Basra ruling elite. The IFOU’s most controversial demand is for the Iraqi government to “concede administrative and financial autonomy” to the southern state-owned Iraqi companies, which are currently headquartered in Baghdad. This squarely places the IFOU in the camp of the Basra-based Islamic Virtue Party or Fadhila, and Basra’s governor, Mohammed al-Waili, a senior Fadhila leader.

Fadhila is dominated by figures with ties to the Basra oil industry. Since 2003, factions of Fadhila have agitated for Basra province to become an autonomous region that would function as an oil-rich city-state modeled on Kuwait. Following the US-led invasion, the organisation collaborated with the British occupation forces and sought to gain as much political influence as possible. As well as controlling the provincial government, most of the 25,000-strong “Oil Protection Force”—an armed body that guards oil fields, refineries, pipelines and the Basra port—are believed to be Fadhila loyalists.

The IFOU’s call for “administrative and financial autonomy” is a roundabout way of demanding that the Fadhila-dominated Basra government be given control over the vast oil and gas resources in the province. In essence, sections of the Basra elite and the IFOU apparatus resent the fact that the wealth derived from the sea of oil they live above has to be shared with the rest of Iraq.

The IFOU wrote in its official letter to the Iraqi oil minister on April 27: “It is our hope to reinstate the rights of those who were aggrieved by Iraqi government officials and eliminate the injustices bestowed upon the

southern region. We feel, up to the moment of this statement's drafting, that discrimination is continuing and that the south is treated as the cash cow of Iraq. Our region gave so much to Iraq, but gained little in return."

A senior Fadhila leader, Aqeel Talib, summed up his party's aspirations in comments to the *New York Times* in June 2006: "We as Fadhila want to make our province our own region. We have two million people, an airport, a port and oil—everything we need to be a state."

The strike has intensified the heated debate over the future of Basra's oil. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that just 24 hours after the IFOU first issued its list of demands on April 27, a coalition of rival Shiite parties, which opposes autonomy, moved a motion in the Basra legislature to remove Waili from office. Armed militias have faced off against one another since, with Waili refusing to step aside and his opponents refusing to obey his government's directives.

The main challengers to Fadhila's control of Basra are the local representatives of the Sadrism movement of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Against the regionalism of Fadhila, the Sadrists advance a nationalist perspective of keeping the oil industry firmly in the hands of a Baghdad-based government and bureaucracy. They are backed by the two Shiite parties that dominate the Iraqi government—Maliki's Da'wa Party and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC). Like the Sadrists, Da'wa and SIIC derive the bulk of their support from the Shiite population outside of Basra and would not benefit from Fadhila's autonomy plan for the province.

The Baghdad government has no intention of ceding control over the southern oil industry. Maliki's response to Monday's industrial action was a vitriolic press statement. He threatened to "strike with an iron fist anyone that would tamper with the public order or carry out evil schemes undermining the state's higher interests". He labelled the union leaders as "outlaws and saboteurs". In a pointed reference to Fadhila, the statement threatened to "disclose some local organisations standing behind the attempts to harm the country's oil facilities and terminals". It also threatened to "disclose their suspicious relations with some countries in the region". Which countries he was referring to is unclear.

Arrest warrants have been issued for as many as 10 IFOU leaders, including against the head of the federation, Hassan Juma'a Awad. The union claims that death threats have been made against its officials and strikers. While a five-day cooling off period is still in force, the strike may yet have a bloody end. Hundreds of

government troops—many of whom are loyal to SIIC—have surrounded the terminals where the pipeline workers control the flow of oil and gas.

The IFOU claims that regional control of the oil industry will lead to better conditions for the working class. It has cynically declared that Iraqi government "pays little to no attention" to the social problems of the population of southern Iraq, such as the high rates of cancer suffered by the inhabitants of south due to DU pollution.

The reality, however, is that working people across Iraq—Sunni or Shiite, Arab or Kurd, Muslim or Christian—are living in appalling conditions created by the US-led occupation and its Iraqi collaborators. Most Iraqis derive no benefit from the exploitation of the country's natural resources. The primary beneficiaries are the transnational energy corporations who purchase the oil products and sell it on the world market. The secondary beneficiaries are their local agents.

Previously, the upper echelons of the Saddam Hussein regime enriched themselves. Now, it is those who have been able to lever themselves into positions of power under the US occupation. Across the oil rich countries of the Middle East, the situation is the same. Whether it is Saudi Arabia, Iran or petty Gulf states like Kuwait and Bahrain, working people face ongoing deprivation, while billions of dollars in oil revenue flow to a narrow wealthy elite.

Neither Fadhila nor its rivals have any genuine concern for the plight of oil workers or any other section of the Iraqi working class. In the event that oil workers began to link their struggle with workers and the unemployed in other parts of the country and to advance their own independent class interests, all factions of the Iraqi ruling elite, together with the US occupying forces, would rapidly bury their differences and back repressive measures against any strikers.



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