

Building unions in Iraq

Amidst the chaos that is Iraq, the daily assassinations, the bombings and artillery fire, the knowledge that when you leave home to go to work you may not return, amidst all of this brave Iraqi men and women are risking their lives to build union organisation.

So why is this so important? It's a question we put to Abdullah Muhsin of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW).

"Because we have no choice," he replies. "We believe in an Iraqi democracy, but you can't achieve that just through setting up the state and a constitution. The institution of democracy is civil society and at the heart of civil society are free and democratic unions. This is well understood by the men and women who fought against Saddam Hussein and who are campaigning now."

Abdullah is the international representative of the GFIW. A student activist during the Hussein regime, he was forced to flee in 1978. He settled in Europe as a political exile and even there his life was at risk. He survived and went on to campaign against the so-called "unions" set up by Hussein as instruments of violence.

Saddam Hussein banned public sector unions in 1987 and this decree has still not been abolished by the elected government, but it is not being enforced. Unions are being formed and are openly recruiting, says Abdullah.

The largest unions are in the oil sector, in health, public transport, electricity, "and in all the basic public services", he says. Two years ago, Iraqi union membership was estimated at 300,000; the figure may be nearly double that now.

And in a society where women's roles are heavily proscribed, women are prominent in the Iraqi union movement. The president of the energy union, for example, is a woman.

"We don't see ourselves as men and women," says Abdullah. "Which is not to say we don't celebrate our gender differences but we see ourselves as Iraqis, as workers, as those who are committed to a new era of democracy and human rights."

"Women suffered terribly under Saddam Hussein. They know the value of free and independent unions and see them as the cornerstone of democracy. I don't want to mask the reality, the situation for women in Iraq is harder - but there are many brave women."

And it requires a deal of bravery to be a union activist in Iraq. Scores have been assassinated, including both the federation's vice president and its international head.

"We have paid heavily and we know the pain," says Abdullah. "We don't want death but we have no choice but to carry on and build unions, despite the sacrifices."

He has no truck with those who argue that the assassinations



A march calling for the removal of occupying troops was held in Auckland on March 17 to mark the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

and suicide bombings are a national liberation struggle.

"These atrocities are committed by the enemies of democracy who want an extreme form of nationalism. These people are extreme hard-liners who want to control and subjugate Iraqi society.

"As unionists, we need to stand up to those extremists and tell them they shall not pass. This is our home, this is our land, and these are our people."

It was a day of jubilation when Saddam Hussein was removed, says Abdullah. "But as a trade union movement, we never called for the war, never wanted the war. We wanted internal change by Iraqis themselves.

"Foreign troops were never invited to enter Iraq. Now they have a duty to protect the civilians who want peace and decent jobs and to look after their families."

What's required, he says, is an international commitment to building an Iraqi army and a police force able to provide the security that ordinary civilians so desperately crave.

"It will take some time and it won't be easy in a nation ravaged by war and militias, but the government and the international community need to expend a lot more effort in training." They won't be starting from scratch, he says, as there are already Iraqi police forces doing a "magnificent and courageous job".

In the meantime, Abdullah is looking to unions around the world to support and give practical help to the fledgling Iraqi unions. "For unions to organise, you need people with training and you need technology - a mobile phone, a computer, a fax machine. We don't have those things," he says.

"Solidarity and support from other unions is essential for our movement to grow and thrive."