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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight interview with Hashemiyya Muhsin Hussein (Iraq - GFIW)

“It’s becoming more and more risky for an Iraqi woman to work”

Brussels, 28 November 2007 (ITUC/TUAC online): Defying the anti-union legislation inherited from the old regime, which prohibits unions in public services, fighting to improve the poor wage and health and safety conditions... many are the challenges facing Hashemiyya M. Hussein, president of the Electricity Workers' Union of Basra. Also a member of the Executive of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers and the ICEM Women's Committee for the Middle East and North Africa, Hashemiyya embodies the very active trade unionism in this southern region of Iraq, where insecurity is nonetheless rife.

How did your Electricity Workers' Union come to defy the ban on unions in public services?

In 1987, the regime of Saddam Hussein banned all unions in public services. The private sector unions managed to survive, but under the authorities' control. In 2003, when the old regime fell, a number of unions regrouped. That's what happened in my sector - electricity. After setting up regional committees throughout the country, we held a conference, in 2004, to set up a leadership structure for the union. Two years later, in June 2006, union elections were held, and I was elected president of the Electricity Workers' Union for the Basra region. That's how we defied the ban on unions in public services.

Why, in your view, were you elected to this leadership post?

During the two years running up to the elections, I had worked very hard to press ahead with the demands of the workers in this sector and was able to secure a number of advances, such as a pay review. Prior to that, there had been huge disparities in the wage scale, with the least experienced and lowest skilled workers receiving very poor wages. Thanks to our struggle, we were able to secure a less unequal wage scale.

What are the main problems facing workers in the electricity sector?

There are many problems. Aside from the extremely difficult situation in terms of insecurity and pauperisation, affecting the population as a whole, the preservation of labour legislation that was in force under Saddam Hussein's regime, which prohibits unions in public services, is a major problem. Even though it's forbidden, we nevertheless continue to work as unions. The new authorities, by decree 8750 passed in 2005, have frozen all access to trade union assets on Iraqi territory (with the exception of Kurdistan), thus stopping us from having a financial situation that would allow us to operate normally. That is the second greatest difficulty.

What kind of image do unions have among the general public?

Many workers are oblivious to trade unionism. The situation is better now in the electricity sector thanks to the concrete results achieved by the trade

union, through our negotiations with the Electricity Ministry, for example. The strike of last July did a lot to improve the image of the union.

What were the demands put forward by the strikers?

There were many, such as the demand for the reform of the law prohibiting unions in public services, or a pay rise for the day labourers, who are very poorly paid as compared with those receiving a monthly wage. We were also protesting at the wage arrears, and raised the issue of workers exposed to uranium, some of whom have contracted serious illnesses. The Ministry accepted our demand to conduct an inquiry into these serious work-related health problems, so that measures can be foreseen to protect these workers. Similarly, we demanded that efforts be made to ensure the maintenance of electrical equipment that represents a danger for the workers, and the authorities also agreed to examine the question, so that the risk of accidents can be reduced.

Do women workers face specific difficulties?

The law provides for gender equality in the electricity sector, but the fact is that some departments discriminate against women when it comes to awarding bonuses or giving promotions. There is a great deal of women working in this sector. During the war between Iran and Iraq, the men left for the front and so women replaced them on a wide scale, which is why there are so many of them now.

Four million Iraqis have fled their homes, half to take refuge in other regions of the country and the other half to go abroad. How has this massive exile affected your sector?

The most qualified and experienced workers have left, creating serious problems in terms of the loss of skills and experience.

Murders, abductions, violence... What is the perception of the widespread insecurity suffered by the Iraqi people as a whole, and that targets trade unionists in particular?

Anyone who is considered to be working against any group or party or faction automatically becomes a target of the other side. Trade unionists are greatly affected. Public opinion, moreover, sees being a trade unionist as being synonymous with taking a huge risk. The security situation is even worse in the Basra region than in Baghdad. There are many murders everyday. People live in a constant state of fear.

How do your family and those close to you feel about your trade union involvement and the risks it entails?

There are two types of reactions. There are those who are afraid and try to discourage me, and then there are those who support me and are proud of me.

Aside from being a trade unionist, is being a woman an added source of danger?

People write slogans on the walls of the markets and other public places against women, against women who work and against women who do not wear the veil. The simple fact of working is dangerous for a woman. But many women have no alternative, because of their financial difficulties.

Yes, the fact that I am a woman has made things very difficult as well, but I didn't want to give up and so I fought for this position, even though I received death threats against myself and even against my son.

What drives you to take so many risks?

I profoundly believe in my work to improve conditions for working men and women.

What role do women occupy in trade unions?

There are many women among the 1700 union members, but only four out of the 49 leading members of the Basra union are women. Because of mentalities and the insecurity, their families put pressure on them not to take risks.

Do you have relations with women's organisations that form part of Iraqi civil society?

Yes, we organise seminars, for example, to which the various women's organisations are invited. When we hold these seminars, we manage to get women trade unionists to come from the various regions of Iraq (1).

What kind of relations do you have with the international trade union movement?

We are in contact with the ICEM (the International Federation of Chemical, Mine, Energy and General Workers' Unions), to which our union affiliated this year. I am a member of its women's committee for the Middle East and North Africa.

I have also taken part in several international trade union missions abroad, in Great Britain and the United States, for example, where I met with trade unionists from the "Labour Against War" movement, as well as many people from the media. We have a lot of contact with other countries, via Internet.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) The ITUC supports regular training activities for Iraqi trade unionists. In March, the ITUC also supported a conference in Amman, attended by ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder, bringing together Iraqi union leaders and representatives from the World Bank and the IMF. The ITUC, in conjunction with the ILO and its other partner organisations, has on numerous occasions condemned the murders and violent attacks committed against several Iraqi trade unionists. The international trade union movement is drawing special attention to the Iraqi oil sector, which is threatened by the proposed Hydrocarbon law that runs counter to workers' interests.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>.

For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on: +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018

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