

Letter from Iraq

Gary Kent

Editor's Note: Gary Kent sends this Letter from Iraq. Gary joined a delegation of trade unionists and British members of parliament in April 2004. The group included Dave Anderson (Labour MP, chair of Labour Friends of Iraq, and past President of UNISON), Sue Rogers (Treasurer of the NASUWT, TUC General Council, and Chair of TUC's Iraq Solidarity Committee), Harry Barnes (Labour MP for 18 years and joint President of Labour Friends of Iraq), Norma Stephenson (Chair of UNISON's International Development Fund, Labour Party's national executive committee), Councillor Clive Furness (founder member of the Campaign against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq), Tim Lezard (Ex-President of the National Union of Journalists) and Abdullah Muhsin (Iraqi Workers Federation International Representative).

The long journey to Iraq via the Gulf was itself a useful introduction to the Middle East. Doha Airport is a major hub for travellers and reminded me of a Star Trek episode where travellers from far-flung galaxies mingle. Bikinis and Burkas, backpackers and bearded Arabs jostled with no apparent friction, though the same cannot be said of the rude Sheikh shepherding his wives through the next plane to Dubai.

It was 3am. when we landed so I didn't see too much, but the call to prayers at 5am. and then 6am. was loud. I wandered around and two things immediately stood out: men and mosques. Eventually, we made Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. A few news cameras greeted us and we were soon in a convoy of cars taking us to a restaurant in a secured compound in central Erbil for the first of much hoomous, lamb and goat. But we were here to talk turkey, so to speak, with the representatives of the new Iraqi trade union movement.

If there were a decent and pluralist liberal press in this country you would not need me to tell you that a labour movement that was pulverised by Saddam – a few hundred underground and exiled activists survived – has now rebuilt itself into a force of nearly a million people. But you're reading it here and not in *the Guardian* or *the Independent*.

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Twenty two leaders of the Iraqi trade union movement from Babel, Basra and Baghdad came to see us for several hours of talks. That the unions bring together people from across the sectarian divide is a sign of hope, but they are under tremendous pressure. The insurgents have murdered an estimated 2,000 union members. Most were public-sector workers just doing their jobs. Some leaders have been assassinated.

Adnan al-Safar, the Iraqi TUC's media officer, talked to us about the 'genocide of working people' – terrorists target labourers queuing for work. It is poor people, rather than the wealthy, bearing the brunt of the insurgency.

The Iraqi government has maintained Saddam's ban on public sector unions. This is a big obstacle as 80 percent of workers are employed by the state. Last year, Ministers decided to freeze unions' assets in an effort, our Iraqi comrade's fear, to establish sectarian client unions. These bulwarks of a pluralist society cannot organise properly but there is a global campaign to reverse the restrictions, and the new government of national unity may do this.

The vice-president of the Iraqi Workers' Federation, Hadi Ali, said that after struggling to beat Saddam, workers are now struggling to build a strong, federal and democratic Iraq. Unions want to see the withdrawal of foreign troops as soon as possible. They also say that oil, education and health should be no-go areas for privatisation.

One hopes that the new government of national unity can help to heal the sectarian rift underlying the violence and open the way for British and American troops to begin returning home. In the meantime, however, Iraqi workers need global support from trade unions and political leaders so that Iraq can use its huge oil wealth to embrace democracy with social justice and peace.

The delegation held substantial talks with the 150,000-strong Kurdistan Workers' Union, which has fraternal links with the wider Iraqi movement. Iraqi Kurdistan has a head start on the rest of Iraq. It enjoyed relative autonomy from the time the US-UK no fly zone was created after the uprising in 1991 until what everyone called the 'liberation' of 2003.

We visited a 'train the trainers' session in Erbil on how to negotiate. It was attended

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by a mixed group of men and women and was funded by UNISON, which also sponsored our trip. It was just like any other UNISON session apart from the language. The session took place in Sami Abdul Rahman Park, which is named after a Kurdish Democratic Party leader who was one of 98 victims of two bomb attacks two years ago. There is a statue dedicated to the victims. A simple inscription reads 'Freedom is not free.'

The Iraqi Kurds know this all too well. The past is omnipresent. One of our most moving experiences was a tour of the Red House in Sulamaniya. The Red House was one of a large network of torture centres under Saddam. This was quite a small one where 5,000 people died. It is now a museum and the curator survived imprisonment there. He showed us the impossibly cramped cells, the bloodied nooses and electrodes. We met several other graduates of the Red House who now have leading positions in the unions and in government. They were quite shy about relating their experiences because so many people had suffered that they felt it was immodest to be singled out.

Nearly 200,000 people were murdered in Saddam's efforts to exterminate the Kurds using chemical weapons of mass destruction. There is, as a consequence, increased incidence of leukaemia and cancers but no clinics to cope with this or the disproportionate numbers of disabled, orphaned and traumatised.

The economy is still pretty ramshackle. We toured a cigarette factory which has 600 workers on the books but hasn't produced a smoke in years – an example of hidden unemployment. Class sizes are high, sometimes as much as over 100. Roads turn from tarmac to dirt and mud in a blink. There are few working petrol stations and petrol is sold at the roadside in jerry cans. I admit to being most scared by our driver's habit of taking a fag break whilst the car was filled up! Otherwise, we felt safe in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The region desperately needs an injection of private foreign investment because, as the local Communist Party leader explained, there is no substantial home-grown bourgeoisie and a trade union movement needs jobs and a thriving economy. We agreed with our trade union hosts that our job should be to help them stand on their own two feet and to help strengthen the labour movement so that it can strike better bargains with foreign capital.

There are certainly big investment needs and opportunities in Iraqi Kurdistan. It's

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often said that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains and these breathtakingly beautiful mountains could indeed make it the Switzerland of the region – but hotels and infrastructure for tourism are vital. And there is oil, gold and copper to be exploited. The Prime Minister told us that English will be the second language and that there is much goodwill towards the British, adding, as a good bargainer, ‘remember, first come, first served.’ We are seeking to encourage foreign investment.

But the most urgent priority is to encourage British trade unions and progressive opinion to back the Iraqi labour movement. We are seeking to assemble a package of solidarity measures – the first important initiative that flows from our trip is the TUC’s appeal for second hand mobile phones.

I appeal to *Democratiya* readers to engage with the Iraqi unions and to help them rebuild Iraq as a whole.

Gary Kent is the Director of Labour Friends of Iraq.