



workers' liberty & Solidarity

Labour Party Conference

Brown's plan is a death blow



**Will Brown
end
political
input of
unions?
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*Picture: Brown and "union
man" Alan Johnson*

Iraq unions unite to fight oil privatisation

BY MARTIN THOMAS

TWO of Iraq's major union federations have formed a united front to fight against oil privatisation and the government's attempt to outlaw the oil unions.

On 8 September the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions and the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions held a launch conference in Basra (centre of the southern Iraqi oil industry) for their united front. They plan to organise a joint demonstration on 24 September. IFOU president Hassan Jumaa said that his union will shut down the oil pipelines if the parliament passes the privatisation law.

Iraq's other main union organisation, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, has also come out against oil privatisation and the government's anti-union moves.

The Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, under US pressure, has been labouring for months to pass an oil privatisation law. The hitch is not so much the principle of privatisation, which the main parties in Iraq's parliament accept, as the distribution of power to negotiate contracts, and to receive revenue, between Baghdad and the regions.

At the start of September, a conference in Dubai was reported to have produced agreement on a draft privatisation law. Now it is not clear. According to oil expert Ben Lando, "neither the Kurds nor the central government can agree on changes each side wants or has made": their chances of reaching agreement are diminished by the fact that "the Iraqi government is becoming weaker every day" and it is hard to get enough members to turn up for sittings of parliament.

But the Kurdistan regional government has already signed deals with foreign companies, and now Hussain al-Shahristani, oil minister in the Baghdad government, says: "If for any political reason the law is delayed, we'll go ahead and start discussions with international oil companies".

In July Shahristani issued instructions to oil industry bosses not to deal with the oil unions. He cited the 1987 decree from Saddam Hussein's era, banning unions in the public sector (the bulk of Iraq's economy). Despite repeated demands from the new unions, that law has never been repealed under the US/UK occupation.

Pretty much all Iraqi unions therefore live in semi-legality, a situation compounded by the Iraqi government's Decree 8750, from August 2005, which nominally confiscates all union funds and puts them under the control of the ministry of labour.

At present central government in Iraq is too weak to enforce such decrees thoroughly, but they remain on the books, to be enforced as and when the government feels strong enough.

On Sunday 2 September, British troops withdrew from their base in the centre of Basra to their remaining outpost at Basra airport. The move is part of a process in which British troops have already, nominally, handed over three of the four provinces they were occupying to Iraqi authorities.

Since the British troops generally kept off the streets as much as they could anyway, and reserve the option of intervening again whenever they see fit, the nominal "handovers" do not make much difference on the ground. For the unions in Basra — facing local authorities divided, sometimes to the point of armed conflict, between the three Islamist movements SCIRI, Fadhila, and Mahdi Army — things will not be easier.

AusIraq, in Australia, has initiated an international petition to support the Iraqi oil unions under attack. You can download a copy, for use in seeking signatures in your workplace or union, from the Iraq Union Solidarity website

• www.iraquionsolidarity.org.

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