

## VISIT TO IRAQ



*The FBU delegates with Iraqi colleagues*

# Mayday is workers' day



*Regional Secretary Howard Western dons Iraqi clothes*

**Bob Pounder**  
Brigade Secretary GMC

SINCE Mayday is international workers day there could be no better way on an anti-imperialist note than to celebrate this event with the workers of the General Federation of Trade Unions (Iraq) at their rally in the National Theatre, Baghdad. Indeed this is exactly where Howard Western (Regional Secretary) and myself found ourselves on May 1, as the first official British trade union delegation to visit the country since before the 1991 Gulf War.

We were part of an international delegation consisting of members from the Vietnamese Confederation of Labour and other British trade unionists notably from the British Medical Association and the National Union of Journalists.

The rally was an exuberant theatre of dance, poetry recitals, and speeches celebrating the national solidarity and struggles of the Iraqi workers and their trade unions through their tumultuous years of war and revolution. A message of solidarity from the

Vietnamese Confederation of Labour as well as the Fire Brigades Union, which included a call for the ending of sanctions against Iraq, was read out and translated to the rally. This was broadcast on Iraqi television and incidentally, throughout the Arab world.

### THE AMIRAYA SHELTER

The following day we visited Amiraya an area to the west of Baghdad. It was here during the six-week bombardment of Iraq that one of the most horrific atrocities of the Gulf War was committed. On February 13, 1991 in the Amiraya bomb shelter 403 civilians including 52 children and 261 women were executed in a planned and co-ordinated attack when a specially designed armour-piercing missile penetrated the ventilation hole. A second missile instantly passed through this hole creating a deadly inferno.

The shelter was a civilian installation and had been constructed during the Iraq / Iran War, to international standards by a consortium of Finnish companies specialising in structures that give protection against chemical and nuclear attacks. It

comprised a building of three floors (including basement) each with an area of 500 square metres. The roof and ceiling were 1.5 metres thick reinforced with steel bars between three to four centimetres in diameter.

As we approached the shelter Karim, the civil defence fire officer who had led the first team of firefighters into the stricken shelter, met us. He explained entry had been extremely difficult since the initial explosion had caused an electrical failure jamming the steel doors trapping the occupants in the ensuing fire. Consequently a side entry through an emergency door had to be made but the shelter was not immediately accessible because of the intense heat. Breathing Apparatus teams using charged 70mm hose were initially driven back by steam, further attempts to cool the fire produced more steam and boiling water. Emergency lighting was taken into the shelter at the earliest possible time during the operation. Unfortunately the worst fears of the firefighters would be realised. The recovery operation lasted for three days and was difficult since the bodies of many people trapped inside the building had melted into the concrete or were simply unrecognisable. Astonishingly enough Karim was able to tell us that 14 people had in fact survived the blast but they were the ones furthest away from the point of impact. Tragically some parents who had not been in the shelter at the time lost their children in the attack.

We were introduced to Ahmad Djududi who was 11 years old when his mother, father and four sisters all perished in the blast. The profound trauma indelibly printed on Ahmad's life had left him with a permanent feeling of guilt that it was his mother and not him that had perished. The Amiraya shelter has now become a shrine to the people who were massacred. Their photographs surrounded by flowers are a permanent reminder of Western barbarism. Karim was asked how such an event had affected the crews that had dealt with such a tragedy. He conceded naturally of course that, "It had, but duty comes first," he added.

## THE IRAQI FIRE SERVICE

From the dark sadness of the Amiraya shelter we stepped into the Iraqi sunshine. Our driver for the week Abbu Haider drove us to the local fire station. The fire crews were waiting for us standing by brand new fire appliances – Renaults purchased on the oil for food programme. The first replacement appliances since before 1990 we were told as we were served Pepsi-Cola in the station office.

One of the fire officers Mr Dowd explained that the United Nations 661 Sanctions Committee had prevented Iraq from purchasing Chinese fire appliances because certain technical specifications breached the sanctions that are still being enforced by the American and British Government. These sanctions, he continued, "Are having a devastating effect on the country and are responsible for the deaths of children who have committed no crime whatsoever". One of the officers fondly remembered the time he had spent on a course with the London Fire Service. "When the sanctions are lifted from Iraq we would wish to return your visit," said Mr Dowd. He added, "When you go back to



*Fire Officer Karim at the point where US missiles penetrated the Amiraya shelter in Baghdad*

Britain please make it clear that we have no quarrel with the British people and that we distinguish between them and the Government that is imposing these sanctions upon us".

Through our interpreter Saleem Khulaief, (GFTU Foreign Relations Secretariat) we replied that the policy of the Fire Brigades Union was to call for the ending of the continued war and sanctions against Iraq and that this was a campaign that we were committed to.

Before saying our farewells, on behalf of the Fire Brigades Union, a number of small fraternal gifts were presented including badges and a wall plate bearing the FBU logo. A GMC Brigade plaque and fraternal letter from County Fire Officer George Almond was presented and this was also well received.

## THE SADDAM CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

On the same day we visited the Saddam Children's Hospital. There we saw first hand the suffering of children the real victims of the sanctions against Iraq. The hospital was in a poor state of repair since after 1990 no proper maintenance had been carried out. This meant that the lifts were no longer working and that the patients and staff have to endure the stifling heat as the air conditioning system had long since ceased to function. Spare parts for all equipment as well as medicines are either non-



## VISIT TO IRAQ



***A child suffering from leukaemia in an Iraqi children's hospital***

existent or are in extremely short supply. Dr Riyadh Abdul Al-Rawi explained that: "This hospital receives referrals from all parts of Iraq, including from as far north as Mosul and as far south as Basra. The main clinical problems, are malnutrition, gastro-intestinal, chest infections and coping with a 500 percent increase in the incidence of cancer". He went on to say that this was attributable to the depleted uranium weapons used against Iraq during the Gulf War. Iraq is still being bombed. He told us that: "In the street where I live five people have cancer".

Children with leukaemia cannot be treated effectively because of the sporadic availability of essential drugs. This is because the Sanctions Committee holds up and even stops the supply of essential drugs and equipment. Seeing children suffering as we did was a disturbing and harrowing experience. The doctor said: "Please tell people when you return to Britain how our children are dying while we watch them. Tell people that the sanctions must be lifted so that our children can live".

### **MEDICAL CITY**

At the Sadaam Medical City we met Palestinians mostly under the age of 21 who had been wounded by Israeli troops. It was made clear to us that Iraq supported and identified with the Intifada and in spite of the sanctions was making a huge sacrifice in order to provide medical treatment for their full recovery.



***Samir Moussa – making a full recovery***

We met Samir Moussa who told us that on 4 January he had been shot by a sniper during clashes in Ramallah on the West Bank. He explained that a new type of 'butterfly' bullet had penetrated his body and had damaged various internal organs. Samir had also received a bullet wound to the head and sustained further injury from a rubber bullet that had hit him in the back. After four weeks in the Ramallah Hospital where he received no treatment the Israeli authorities allowed him to leave the country for treatment.

Literally dying, Samir Moussa arrived in Baghdad with a body weight by now of only 28 kilograms. At the Medical City he had received many operations, but the director said that he was making a full recovery. Like the other Palestinians who were the patients of Medical City it was patently clear that Samir was not an aggressor, he was just a youngster caught up in a conflict that was not of his making. Even so, the struggle for an independent Palestinian homeland and total opposition to the state of Israel and Western imperialism, no matter what the cost, was the same message that every Palestinian in Medical City was keen to stress.

### **GENERAL FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS**

In spite of the years of sanctions and Britain's continuing war against Iraq, during our short stay we were treated as honoured guests and friends. On the second day of our stay in Baghdad we attended a meeting of the GFTU where we were welcomed by the President Jamil al-Jabouri on behalf of the Executive Committee. In his opening speech Jamil al-Jabouri remarked that the workers of Iraq and their children had to endure sanctions and genocide as a consequence of Britain and America's actions against them. He said: "The sanctions have continued for 11 years and there has been a lot of sacrifice, we say to you, our brothers, the determination of the Iraqi citizen is significant. We are sure that victory will be ours. It will also be a victory for all fair-minded people, amongst these people our brothers and friends in Britain. Your visit is a message to the enemies of humanity".

### **MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF LABOUR**

The following day we were privileged to meet the Minister of Labour, Doctor Saddi Tuma Abbass, at his office where, with the

senior members of the GFTU, a discussion on relations between Britain and Iraq took place. He informed us of the awareness in Iraq that there is opposition to the sanctions in Britain and that this has been seen on television.

As well as the hardship and industrial undercapacity arising from the sanctions, the minister very much regretted that the universities of Britain were now no longer available to the thousands of Iraqi students who had in the past had the opportunity to study there. This was having a detrimental effect on cultural life in Iraq. He looked forward to an improvement in relations between our two countries and believed that the British government should not take such a hostile position against Iraq. He said: "However our impression of the British people is that they are friendly and peace loving people".

On the question of the Iraqi regime, the minister said: "Hostile states try to give the picture that the government is isolated from the people of Iraq and that there is some dispute between the government and the people, that the government is there only because it has a security apparatus and is not stable. Surely you have seen with your own eyes the situation as it is. You know that this is not true. Take on the responsibility to convey this through the press and media to citizens in any way you can. Without popular support this government could not have survived till now. We have had to endure thousands of US warplanes bombing this country, after that we were denied many basic necessities including pencils, (Iraq, a country that taught the world to write!) medical textbooks and so on. People smile and enjoy life they get married and have proper social relations. You can oblige people to do most things but you cannot oblige them to smile. Deep in their hearts there is the bitterness of the past few years, but they are also looking forward to the future. Thank you very much again for your visit".

## CULTURAL VISITS

Saleem Khulaief and Abbu Haider worked hard to ensure that our delegation was able to visit many diverse attractions in or close to Baghdad. These visits included Babylon, the holy city of Karbala and the ancient city of Samarra famous for its golden mosque and Spiral Minaret. We visited the teahouses in Baghdad, its markets and art galleries as well as the outstanding Al-Shaheed

monument and museum which features two 40-metre, massive split domes clad in blue ceramic tiles. This outstanding architectural achievement dominates the skyline of eastern, central Baghdad. From the modern to the ancient we were conveyed thirty miles to the South of Baghdad. There on the east bank of the River Tigris we saw the ancient palace of Al-Madain its origins dating back to the third millennium BC. This unique building is distinguished by having the largest single span brick built arch in the world. Built in the third century AD it is described as 'a miracle of architectural planning'.

On one of our last visits we were taken to the Museum of Steadfastness. Here two members of staff, Raghad and Intisar showed us scale models depicting both the destruction and reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure, industry, schools and hospitals. The allied bombing, cruise missiles, guided laser bombs, cluster bombs and air to surface missiles truly devastated Iraq. In spite of all the sanctions and hardship much of the reconstruction has now taken place. A statement in the centre of a photographic display reads: "By the efforts and hard work of the good people of Iraq the smile returns to all Iraqi children. You can see the children play and the smile on their faces".

## BRITISH TRADE UNIONS MUST ACT

Action from other trade unions to end the sanctions on Iraq is long overdue. The Fire Brigades Union is absolutely correct in taking yet another step in this direction. The current Labour Government is constantly being challenged in areas of domestic policy not least in its disastrous approach to the funding of the public services through the introduction of the Private Finance Initiative. Surely our government is not beyond reproach and accountability in contentious areas of foreign policy. The whole of the trade union movement for internationalist and humanitarian reasons has a duty and responsibility to act. In the fullness of time the Fire Brigades Union position on Iraq will be vindicated. To some of the other bigger trade unions we would express the hope and urge that we will arrive at this event sooner rather than later.

On behalf of the Fire Brigades Union Number Five Region we should like to record our thanks to Mr Karim Abdullah Hamza, GFTU (Iraq) Secretary of International Relations, for organising and helping to make our visit to Iraq a complete success.



*Bob Pounder (left) and Howard Western (right) with Abbu Haider and Saleem Khulaief*