

Making Solidarity with Grassroots Iraq

A speech by Alan Johnson, Labour Friends of Iraq, to Leeds North East Constituency Labour Party, March 30 2005

1. Introduction: what is 'Labour Friends of Iraq'?

I'd like to thank Leeds North East CLP for inviting Labour Friends of Iraq to address the constituency meeting tonight.

We launched Labour Friends of Iraq six months ago in October 2004 to bring together party members such as myself who had opposed the war and party members who had supported the war. Our shared belief was that that the priority was now to *move on* (if not to give up) arguments about the invasion. Our shared purpose was to *make* urgent practical solidarity with the democrats struggling to make a new Iraq in desperately difficult conditions, and that that meant, firstly, uniting the labour movement and the left here in Britain around support of the fledgling labour movement in Iraq.

This post-war unity of purpose between pro-war and anti-war forces was symbolised by the choice of our two Presidents. One is Ann Clwyd who opposed Saddam Hussein since the 1980s and who is the Prime Minister's envoy on human rights to Iraq. The other is the North East Derbyshire MP Harry Barnes. Harry opposed the war, marched against the war, and still believes he was right to do so. The two have united to focus party members on the great task of making solidarity with Grassroots Iraq.

Now it is easy to say that – 'solidarity with Grassroots Iraq' – but what does it mean? It means practical steps – steps any local party, any union branch, any individual could take – that, in sum, will wrap the fledgling organisations of the new democratic Iraq in a blanket of solidarity. LFIQ has made a start in creating that blanket of solidarity:

Let me say a few words about what we've been doing.

- **LFIQ helped organise a fringe meeting of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions on 'Solidarity with Grassroots Iraq' at the 2004 Labour Party conference**
- **LFIQ (with kind help from USDAW) has produced a 'Toolkit for Solidarity with Grassroots Iraq'. (I have brought some copies tonight, please take them)**
- **LFIQ has organised global solidarity campaigns with Iraqi democrats. I'll talk about one, with Nozad Ismail, shortly.**
- **LFIQ has circulated model resolutions to Constituency Labour Parties on topics such as US Military Action in Falluja which we opposed and the Defence of Iraqi Trade Unionists. We have addressed local**

Labour Parties, regional conferences, and helped to bring together UK trade unionists and Iraqi trade unionists. LFIQ supporters were instrumental in organising a tour of the Birmingham trade unions, for instance, for Abdullah Muhsin, the IFTU rep in London. We have publicised vigils in support of Iraqi women's and student's rights, under vicious attack by Fundamentalists. We have promoted the work of the Jubilee Iraq Network.

- **LFIQ has publicised strikes** in Iraq such as the successful Baghdad Hotel Workers Strike in February 2005, and helped to network support for the strikers.
- **LFIQ has pressed Government Ministers and the Prime Minister in the House of Commons** for commitments on the defence of trade union rights in the new Iraq, on the treatment of detainees, and on democracy. There are many LFIQ-supporting MPs and the number is growing. They have tabled questions and Early Day Motions to give the House an opportunity to show its support for grassroots Iraq. We have organised meetings for visiting Iraqi democrats in the House of Commons.
- **The LFIQ website** (<http://www.labourfriendsofiraq.org.uk/>) has hundreds and hundreds of visitors each day, from the UK, Europe, America, Australia, Asia, Iraq and the Middle East. It acts as a **platform for the voices of Iraqi Democrats** to be heard. We post news, interviews with the political parties, speeches and policy statements. It also acts as a **forum for the democratic left in Britain to discuss Iraq**.
- We have plans to launch a foreign policy ejournal of the democratic left, Democratiya, and to recruit interns, organise a delegation of party members to Iraq and more.

We think LFIQ has done pretty well in six months for a group with almost no money, no staff and no office! With some embarrassment I've circulated a set of endorsements from trade union leaders, Labour MPs, Iraqi trade unionists, Iraqi democrats, journalists and academics (see end of speech). With no embarrassment at all I have forms for anyone who would like to donate money to LFIQ (see end of speech). Please consider it.

But that's enough about LFIQ. I want to talk tonight about the Iraqi democrats as the third force in Iraq.

2. The Third Force in Iraq: the Iraqi Democrats

Between the US-UK troops and the reactionary Ba'athist-Islamist 'resistance' there is a third force in Iraq.

That third force is made up of three components. We owe urgent solidarity to each. I will say something about the kind of individuals who embody each component, and about the solidarity work LFIQ promotes with each.

First, there are the Iraqi free trade unions struggling for labour rights, decent labour conditions, a decent labour code and an economy of social justice rather than a profits pool for the corporations.

Second, there are the Iraqi democratic political parties who fight for a secular, federal, plural and fully democratic Iraq against those forces that seek a controlled pseudo-democracy, a theocracy, or, help us, a return to the torments of the Ba'ath.

Third, there are a host of civil society groups and networks, such as women's groups and student groups, that are struggling for their human rights in the new Iraq.

Each component of this third camp is fighting for its life in the new Iraq. Each has the right to expect Labour Party members will support them.

Making Solidarity with Trade Unions

The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions is the most important and by far the largest of the trade unions that have emerged in post-Saddam Iraq. Let me give you some background.

There is a long tradition of a democratic labour movement and progressive politics in Iraq. In 1959 the unions mobilised a million people for its May Day demonstration from a population of only 6.5 million. The Iraqi Communist Party had 25,000 members in 1959, a daily newspaper, and affiliated women's and youth groups.

In 1979 Saddam seized power after a bloody internal coup in the Ba'ath party. His regime immediately broke up the independent workers' trade unions. He took over their offices and arrested their leaders. He turned the unions into yellow unions and appointed his own stooges. Independent and progressive leaders of the old free unions were executed or imprisoned.

In 1987, Saddam's regime introduced a new Labour Code, which removed the right to form or join trade unions. He abolished the eight-hour day and handed over workers pension fund to the treasury without compensation. Saddam announced these measures during a televised meeting with the yellow union leadership and members of the "Central Workers Office" of the Ba'ath party. He said: "From now on, the title 'worker' is abolished and all workers shall become official employees by the State. As everybody is now a government employee, there is no more need for trade unions. Workers in the private sector will have a special labour law decreed for them". The 'yellow' union applauded all these measures

Many of today's IFTU militants were driven underground during Saddam's thirty year totalitarian rule, forming the Workers Democratic Trade Union Movement. In Britain, in 1982, as a result of information passed on by the WDTUM to tobacco workers union leader Dougie Grieve, the TUC conference passed a motion condemning the atrocities against workers taking place in Iraq.

Some of today's IFTU militants were tortured in Saddam's jails. I had the honour of meeting Subhi al Mashadani, the General Secretary of the IFTU, at a TUC reception in London last year. Subhi was held for ten years in Saddam's jails and he was tortured. When one thinks that this giant of a man came to London last year and was abused and physically attacked by the 'revolutionaries' of the European Social Forum, who shouted their slogans of victory to the resistance as they jostled Subhi, one does not know whether to laugh or cry.

In 2003 when Saddam fell these militant free trade unionists organised the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.

They organised an open meeting on 16 May 2003 attended by 350 Iraqi trade unionists (liberals, communists, and nationalists, both Arab and Kurds). It was at this meeting that the IFTU was formed.

The IFTU now has over 200,000 members.

The IFTU has achieved some great things against the odds. 12 national unions in key sectors of the Iraq's economy have been established. The IFTU now includes the following unions: The Oil and Gas Union, the Railway Union, The Transport and Communication Union, the Mechanics, Printing and Metal Union. The Textile and Leather products Union, the Construction and Wood Workers' Union, the Electricians' Union, the Service Industry Union and the Agriculture and Food Staff Workers' Union.

These unions organise in Baghdad and across Iraq's 15 provinces such as Basra, Kirkuk, Mosul, Kurbala, al Najif, Babel and Mesan.

In 2004 many of the IFTU's constituent unions held their first open and free workers' conferences in Baghdad and elected a leading committee.

The IFTU takes strike action. The recent strike of Hotel workers in Baghdad, which we publicised on the LFIQ website was victorious.

In Baghdad, the Mechanic, Printing and Metal Union organized industrial action in a bicycle factory near Baghdad. The president of the union committee Najim Al Daham called for a 24-hour strike and won pay increases from 17,000 to 60,000 Iraqi Dinner. The IFTU was able to bring solidarity delegations from seven Baghdad work places representing several unions, to demonstrate outside the main gate of the bicycle factory in support of the strikers' demands.

The bonds of workers solidarity are being reforged in Iraq.

The IFTU is pressing hard for the incorporation in the new Labour Code of ILO principles, leading the way.

But while the IFTU has many goals it lacks basic resources. It has no access to the funds of the official Saddam unions, which are frozen. It lacks such basic essentials as desks, chairs, computers and faxes and other IT technologies.

So the IFTU is asking it's brothers and sisters in the international labour movement to provide practical assistance. The IFTU also needs training in basic skills such as Health and Safety and Collective Bargaining.

The British trade union movement, with strong TUC encouragement, has been very supportive. Practical support has arrived from many unions including the RMT, the FBU, Unison and the PCS. Such support has been invaluable and the IFTU have been inspired by such gestures of solidarity. One example: the FBU delivered a large container of 600 essential life-saving fire kits (boots, leggings, tunic & helmet) including chemical suits to the IFTU and Iraqi firefighters.

The IFTU has good relations with international Labour movement like the ICFTU, with many European federations such as the CGT and CGIL and with COSATO, the AFL-CIO and with many other trade union centres around the world, such as the Korean labour movement. The Swedish unions have also provided financial support to run basic courses in Trade Unionism.

The IFTU is not the only trade union in Iraq. There are several union federations. The Federation of Workers Councils and Union of the Unemployed of Iraq can be found at <http://www.uuiraq.org/>. There are Kurdish unions independent of the IFTU though sharing cordial relations. And there is the General Union of Oil Employees in Basra, as well as various professional organisations such as the Teachers and Journalists.

But the new free trade unions face tremendous difficulties.

The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions Under Seige

In 2003 the offices of the IFTU were raided by coalition troops and IFTU leaders were held in custody.

In 2004 and 2005 the IFTU came under murderous assault from the so-called 'resistance'. Its leaders were assassinated – targeted by death squads - its union headquarters came under RPG attack. And on the Mosel-Baghdad rail line its members were kidnapped, murdered and their bodies mutilated.

But let us not speak only of 'headquarters' and 'members' and 'leaders'. Let us talk about a man, Hadi Saleh, and his story.

Hadi's friend and comrade, Faleh A. Jabar, a leading contemporary Iraqi sociologist wrote this about his dear friends torture and murder at the hands of the 'resistance' in January 2005. Forgive me for the long quote.

"A group of five, most probably, ex-security men, broke into his house in Baghdad, waited for him in the dark and preyed on him the moment he stepped in. They killed three times: first they strangled him with a wire; second they riddled his body with bullets; lastly they burnt him. This was not an ordinary killing. Unlike show beheadings that mark 'resistance' in Iraq, this was a triple vengeance: in the 1970s Saleh was condemned to death for clandestine unionism, he was amnestied years later, now the Ba'ath security men working in clandestine for restoration reneged on their amnesty.

"They also took vengeance for the successes Saleh achieved in rebuilding trade unions (The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU) that stand now at some 200,000 membership, a formidable democratic social movement defying all sorts of fundamentalist, communal or other parochial identities. Lastly, they wanted to hush him and his colleagues who pursue a twin line of peaceful action for the restitution of Iraq's sovereignty and building an all-inclusive, federal democracy.

"Perhaps he was born with a smile; and simply forgot it was there. I never saw him appearing without that innocent grin. (..) After his return from Sweden in 2003 with his wife Corea and two kids, the offices of the Iraqi unions were raided by the coalition forces for no apparent reason. I was worried about him. Following the macabre series of kidnapping and beheadings in 2004, my worries grew even sharper, and he had this reassurance to offer at our last encounter in Baghdad in November 2004: 'I am a worker and unionist not a politician, who on earth would wish to target me. They are killing your lot, writers and intellectuals'.

"I wish he were right. He was on the hit list by the very murderers who raped the nation for thirty odd years and who re-emerged now with the gold they dug from the Central Bank, their family networks and the criminals of the underworld, putting a false mantle of 'resistance'.

"Millions of Iraqis are resisting the occupation peaceably. Their collective wisdom is that restitution of sovereignty should go hand in hand with popular mandate, and block restoration. Hadi Saleh's death is a wake-up call for all those who rightly opposed the war, but wrongly support post-conflict violence. The millions of Iraqis who defied death to vote reiterated Saleh's message and sacrifice for those who may see in bombing utilities, gas stations, union offices, voters and voting stations as 'anti-imperialist' endeavours. Sceptics should ask at least one question: if insurgents genuinely enjoy massive popular support, as they seem to claim, why do they fear the ballot?"

The Stop the War Movement

Though I respect those who supported the invasion on a 'regime change' basis, as a humanitarian intervention, I myself opposed the invasion of Iraq. I marched against it, organised school students walk-outs, teach-ins', blocked roads and train lines.

But when we think of Hadi Saleh's torture and murder is it any wonder that many who marched against the invasion have been looking again at the leaders of the Stop the War Coalition?

Andrew Murray and Lindsey German, the leaders of the Coalition, circulated a statement supporting the resistance by 'whatever means they find necessary'? (an embarrassed national committee made them delete the phrase).

George Galloway, the Coalition best known leader, fingered the IFTU as 'quislings in the Arab press.

Sami Ramadani wrote in the Guardian that he could think of no better word than 'collaborator' to describe the IFTU.

Cambridge Respect Officers and Parliamentary candidate refused to sign the statement in support of Nozad Ismail, saying, to their shame, "We...repudiate the so-called Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions... it has effectively transferred its loyalty from one murderous tyrant to another, from Saddam Hussein to George W. Bush." An ignorant libel of course but not surprising coming from Respect.

Alex Callinicos, the guru of Respect and StW, and a Socialist Workers Party leader, sneered at the outcry over Hadi's death as a 'hullaballo' about a 'communist' and a collaborator.

It has been truly been a scoundrel time.

Is it any wonder that Mick Rix, the left-wing socialist ex-leader of the train drivers union, ASLEF, resigned from the Stop the war Coalition? It is worth quoting the angry words of Mick Rix to Andrew Murray, Chair of StWC, 21 October 2004:

"If you think I am going to sit back and agree with beheadings, kidnappings, torture and brutality, and out right terrorization of ordinary Iraqi and others, then you can forget it. (...)

"I don't think you also realise the danger that your actions and those of the Respect colleagues in the StWC have placed [the Foreign Representative of the IFTU] against attacks from extremists. Some people talk about life and death situations, some unfortunately have to live it and so do their families in Iraq and I don't see why you, Respect or the coalition have a right to think you can place them in that situation,

when they are living daily with those consequences, because they are not the "new" friends of yourself, George, StWC or Respect such as extreme nationalists, or religious fundamentalists. It is you who have attacked the IFTU and Abdullah (...)

"I will not stand by and say or do nothing, when decent trade unionists, and socialists in the UK, and good committed socialists and trade unionists in Iraq or elsewhere are being attacked, by people who politically have made alliances with, and are supporting, religious fanatics and people who are basically against everything that our movement really stands for."

Mick Rix was right. His words should hit home for each of us. None of us should 'stand by and do nothing' while the free trade unionists of Iraq are threatened by death squads. None of us should place 'not criticising the anti-war movement' above the lives of Iraqi trade unionists as some have. That is why LFIQ has issued a global labour appeal for solidarity with Nozad Ismail, the 40 year old IFTU leader in Kirkuk who has survived two assassination attempts and whose life is threatened still. In a short time we have won over 650 messages of solidarity from all over the world. We know this has appreciated mightily by Nozad. A network of labour internationalists, unionists willing to help the new free trade unions of Iraq, is being created.

But the unions are only the first component of the third camp in Iraq, the second is the democratic political parties of Iraq.

Making Solidarity with the Democratic Political Parties

Again, let me personalise this. Who is Barham Salih? He is the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, an exile from Saddam in England and a social democrat. He addressed the Council of the Socialist International on February 7 2004 and appealed to called on each of us 'to help Iraqi democrats in this critical juncture of the history of the Middle East. To help us transform our country from the land of mass graves and aggression, to the land of peace, justice and democracy'

In late 2004 Barham Salih was invited by Anne Clwyd, Joint President of Labour Friends of Iraq, to give the annual Keir Hardie lecture in Wales. He recalled that, "In 1980, when I came to Cardiff, I fled my country, I fled repression and tyranny. Wales gave me a home, gave me an education and gave me lifelong friendships that I cherish. "I'm confident that the people of Wales are freedom fighters and recognise freedom fighters around the world and will support freedom and liberty".

But it is not clear that parts of the western left have recognised who the real freedom fighters are in Iraq. The reaction in some quarters to the historic election in Iraq made this plain.

On January 30 2005, Iraq held its first election. Over 8 million Iraqis went to the polls to elect a 275-member Transitional Assembly.

But let's stop right there. 'Went to the polls' does not capture what happened, does it? Even as voters were being blown up by homicide bombers they voted. At one polling station the fascist in question blew himself up before he could reach the lines of voters. So all day long the voters walked around his body, spitting on it as they went in to vote, showing it the purple finger as they exited. One family saw their son blown up, did their duty to his body, and then went and voted in honour of his memory. No, 'going to the polls' does not capture what a triumph of democracy and the human spirit was January 30 2005 in Iraq.

The Assembly will choose a government, draft a national constitutional referendum and supervise fresh elections in December 2005. This political process is fully backed by the United Nations under resolution 1546.

The western left arrived at a crossroads in January 2005, whatever our view of the invasion in 2003. The choice was stark. To support the vast majority of the Iraqi people as they reached out for democracy via the UN backed political process or to give comfort to those who attacked polling stations, shot election workers, and bombed lines of voters.

The democratic choice faced off against the nihilist choice. Listen to two representative voices.

The democratic choice was summed up by Abdullah Muhsin, Foreign Representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions. He surely spoke for all democrats when he said,

“Elections certainly offer the best hope of a secure Iraq and will legitimise the current UN-sanctioned political process, which is aimed at producing a national sovereign transitional assembly and a government mandated by the people. This view rests its legitimacy on international law - UN resolutions 1483, 1511 and 1546 - and the engagement of the majority of Iraqis and their key political parties across Iraq. Surely Iraqis, after all their struggles and sacrifices, have won the right to hold elections. Democracy is not given freely, but won, and to achieve it we shall walk, with heads held high, looking straight into the eyes of the enemies of democracy”.

The nihilist choice was caught in the voice of the Ansar al Sunnah Army who on January 19 2005 posted an internet video showing the killing of two Iraqis who were working for an internet company that Ansar al Sunnah claimed was involved in preparations for the Iraqi elections. The statement read:

“We say to all who support the forces and have anything to do with the elections farce: Repent now and stop your disbelief so that you save your souls, or accept the hollowness of your fate as was the fate of these, as Allah is my witness. And may Allah grant peace and greetings to our prophet Mohammad and to his family and his friends (The military

organization of the Ansar Al Sunnah Army, 9 Dhu'l-Hijjah 1425 / 19 January 2005).

Those parts of the western left which heard both these voices – the democratic trade unionist and the theocratic fascist – and remained indifferent at best, sneering and ‘above the fray’, or sided with the fascists at worst, will never live it down. And nor should they be allowed to.

Here is the authentic voice of one part of the western left. Seamus Milne is the editor of Guardian Comment and Analysis pages. On January 13 he argued that Iraq elections would be... ‘at best irrelevant’.

Contrast that tired cynicism to the voice of an Iraqi candidate, Ahmed Khudayer, who beamed as he described his experience on the stump. "We drove round the streets last Sunday with a motorcade led by a white school bus with the roof taken off and garlanded with flowers to get attention. It went on for four hours. People were crying with joy. They remembered the past," he said. (He is campaign manager for a coalition of secular parties called the United Democratic Forces).

Here is another voice of this part of Western Left. Socialist Worker - the leading force behind George Galloway's Respect Coalition - condemned the election as... ‘nothing but a fraud’ (29 Jan).

Note that. ‘Nothing but’ a fraud. Compare this with the voice of an Iraqi voter. “For 35 years we haven't had free or democratic elections. There was voting for just one person, the dictator Saddam. I am going to vote and no one can threaten me because I am loyal to my country and I will not stay at home. If there really is a guy called Zarqawi I will still vote, even if it takes my life”.

If the incoherent my-enemy's–enemy-is-my-friend ‘anti-imperialism’ of George Galloway, Seamus Milne and the SWP are not to set the tone for the British left in the future - as it has all too often in the past– we need to join together to deliver labour movement solidarity to our allies in Iraq.

The third component of the third camp in Iraq are the many civil society organisations from women's groups to student groups who are fighting for human rights.

Making Solidarity with Women and Students for their Human Rights

Who is Zihour Ashour? She is a young woman who on March 15 2005 was viciously assaulted by radical Islamist thugs in Basra. Her crime? She was in a public park with other students, boys as well as girls. They were having a picnic. Hooded men – violent radical Islamists, supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr - assaulted the students with rubber cables and truncheons, waving pistols. Zihour, an Armenian Christian girl, was beaten on her head so hard with a thick stick of wood that she lost an eye. Another student (a boy) who came to

her rescue after militiamen had torn off her clothes and were beating her was shot in the head and he died subsequently from his injuries.

Students say that their belongings, such as mobile phones, cameras, stereo players and loudspeakers, were stolen or smashed to pieces by the militiamen. Girl students not wearing headscarves, most of them Christian, were severely beaten and at least 20 students were kidnapped, taken to Sadr's office in Al-Tuwaisa for 'interrogation' and were only released late at night.

Students also say British soldiers were nearby but did not intervene.

The response from democratic Iraq has been magnificent. Students from Basra and Shatt Al-Arab universities in Basra City have been on all-out strike. One Iraqi email correspondent writes: "The students of all colleges are in what you can say a revolution because of this. They made many demonstrations against Al-Mahdi army and Al-Sadr demanding to remove their offices from the universities".

The General Union of Students in the Iraqi Republic (GUSIR, Basra branch) has been joined by many other faculties and high schools and thousands of Basra citizens on the streets.

Al-Sadr and tribal groups have demanded the students issue an apology for insulting Islam or face the bombardment of their university. The students – the bulk of whom remember are practising Muslims - refuse to back down. Their protest is growing and has generated a lot of support, particularly among young people.

Sheikh Al-Basri, one of Sadr's aides in Basra, stated – openly on TV - that the 'believers' of the Mahdi Army did what they did (beat and murdered peaceful students having a picnic) in an act of 'divine intervention' in order to punish the students for their 'immoral and outrageous behaviour' during the 'holy month of Muharram, while the blood of Imam Hussein is yet to dry.' He added that he had sent the 'group of believers' to observe and photograph the students, and on witnessing them playing loud music, 'the kind they play in bars and discos', and openly talking to female students, the 'believers had to straighten things out'.

In reply the students slogans are 'No to political Islam', 'No to the new tyranny' and 'No to Sadr'. They are demanding: bring the Sadrist militiamen to a public trial in the presence of representatives from Basrah's student groups; ban Islamist armed groups from entering campus or running Islamist student groups; dissolve the infamous 'Security Committee' which operates in most of Basra's colleges, and which is reminiscent of the Ba'ath's 'University Security' but taking a Shi'ite Islamic appearance instead of a fascist nationalistic one.

Student groups from Baghdad, Arbil and Suleimaniya have sent statements of support to Basra. A national democratic student movement is finding its voice.

The students are finding allies in Iraq. The IFTU (the very union George Galloway and Respect finger as 'quislings' and 'collaborators') organised on Monday 22 March a public demonstration in one of Basra's main streets in support of the Iraqi students. The IFTU statement read "We support a democratic Iraq and opposes any political or social repression reminiscent of the movement of the Taliban".

The Basra students have found allies here in Britain. Peter Tatchell, the National Unions of Students and others have rallied to their aid. To get involved contact Alan Clarke Alan Clarke (UK National Union of Students national executive member) on alan.clarke@nus.org.uk .

Gay and Lesbian Rights

Three Iraqi 'resistance' groups, when they threatened to kill anybody participating in the Iraqi elections released a new statement on their websites denouncing democracy as 'a Greek word meaning the rule of the people, which means that the people do what they see fit,' (...) The statement continues, "This concept is considered apostasy and defies the belief in one God - Muslims' doctrine." 365Gay.Com is reporting that 'The statements said that democracy would lead to gay rights which was un-Islamic

3. Moving On

What do LFIQ mean when we invite party members to 'move on'? 'Moving on' does not mean forgiving and forgetting. Many party members feel they were misled about Iraq and they will, rightly, want to go on arguing about the decision to go to war, about 45 minutes, the JIC, the dossier, the Attorney General, and so on. Moving on does not mean 'falling into line'. Moving on does not mean 'shutting up'.

Moving on means siding with Hadi Saleh and Nozad Ismail. It means siding with Barham Salih. It means siding with Zihoor Ashour and the Basra students. It means extending the hand of solidarity. It means telling the likes of George Galloway that enough is enough.

Moving on does not mean no longer caring about what the Attorney General said, when, and to whom. But moving on does mean giving up such an obsessional fixation about what the Attorney General said to Tony Blair in March 2003 that you cannot hear what Barham Salih or Zihoor Ashour are saying today, to you, in Spring 2005.

Moving on is not about getting 'on message with Blair'. But it does mean getting past a certain brand of unrelenting negativist and corrosively cynical sneering about every development in Iraq. The New York Times columnist Thomas L Friedman said 'All the Europeans care about is being able to say to George Bush "We told you so"'. Is he right? Well, maybe more often than we'd care to admit. Does Friedman not capture something about the journalism of John Humphreys, Jeremy Paxman, Seamus Milne and Robert Fisk?

Of course we must not look at Iraq through rose-tinted spectacles. Yes we should oppose with all our strength the abuses at Abu Ghraib, the bombing of civilians, the failures of reconstruction. Yes, we must speak out loudly, as LFIQ does, for human rights, a Marshall Plan for Iraq, social justice in the economy, and a speedy withdrawal of troops. LFIQ has called for an absolute prohibition on torture, the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld, an end to the bombing of Falluja, and demands a speedy withdrawal of the troops as part of the UN backed political process that will restore full sovereignty to Iraq.

But it is not to aid George Bush or Tony Blair to admit that we have witnessed the removal of Saddam, the end of the Ba'ath, the return of the refugees, the joy of the Kurds, religious freedoms now enjoyed by the Shia, the creation of a UN-backed political process, the 8 million voters in the January elections, a fantastic display of 'purple power', the rebirth of trade unionism and the labour movement, the rise of new democratic political parties, a relatively free press, the reflooding of the Marshlands and the return of the persecuted Marsh Arabs, the opening up of the mass graves, and the beginning of a truth and justice process.

I am sometimes reminded of the expression 'some people can't think and chew gum at the same time'. It should be possible for the left to oppose the crimes of the occupation while making solidarity with Grassroots Iraq.

Let us not mistake the daily Steve Bell cartoon for a serious socialist response to Iraq.

LFIQ's argument is simple. Hold the Bush administration and our Labour government to account. But don't leave it at that, as if a daily snort at 'the cowboys in Washington' was our internationalist duty done.

Let us move on from an 'anti-war' campaign and build an Iraqi *solidarity campaign*.

For there is a great prize to be grasped in Iraq.

4. Iraq the Model

'Iraq the Model' is the name of a blog started off by an Iraqi. The phrase sums up something else, though. It sums up the Great Prize to be won in Iraq.

Speaking for myself I believe Iraq is the hinge of our time. Failure in Iraq would define the post-cold-war world as surely as success. Nothing we could do anywhere will reduce terrorist threat than a democratic outcome in Iraq. And imagine the magnetic attraction of a social democratic Iraq! A social democracy in a mainly Islamic society in the Middle East, fiercely independent and proud, but with peaceful relations with the region and the world, with a welfare state, labour rights, and economic development. That is the great prize to be won not just by the Iraqi people but by the world. And make no

mistake, that prospect terrifies the terrorists more than any amount of anti-terror legislation.

And in 21st century Iraq – just as it was in 19th century Britain – leading the way will be the labour movement, women’s organisations, democratic political parties, civil society groups, progressive intellectuals. They will be the bearers of that sensibility, the creators of those networks, the organisers of the new Iraq of social justice and democracy. A mass, well-organised and confident trade union movement could do much to bring Iraqis together regardless of their religious, ethnic or national origins. The IFTU is not Shia, Kurd or Sunni, Assyrian or Christian, but brings all together to improve their working conditions, pay and social provision. And when people come together to do that, well, we know what can happen next. If socialism is to be put on the agenda in Iraq it will be as the practical and positive political expression of the values embodied in those progressive movements not as the cuckoo in the resistance nest as some on the western left delude themselves.

5. Conclusion: another left is possible

I want to end by making a series of points about ‘the left we have’ and ‘the left we need’. LFIQ is a broad church solidarity organisation. But I think these arguments would be widely shared among the other executive committee members

Much of the left has backed itself into an incoherent and negativist ‘anti-imperialist’ corner. It has lost touch with democratic, egalitarian and humane values long-held on the democratic socialist left. This has come about because the ‘anti-imperialist’ left – guided by theorists such as Alex Callinicos, politicians such as George Galloway, journalists such as Seamus Milne - has reduced the complexity of the post-cold-war world to a single Great Contest: ‘Imperialism’ or ‘Empire’ versus ‘the resistance’ or ‘the multitude’. Today’s ‘anti-imperialist’ left is gripped by the same manichean world-view and the same habits of mind that dominated much of the left in the Stalinist period (from apologia to denial, from cynicism to grossly simplifying tendencies of thought, from the belief that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ to the abandonment of workers who get on the wrong side of the ‘anti-imperialists’).

The consequence of this Manichean (black and white) thinking, in the Stalinist period and again today, is political and moral disorientation and a kind of Grand Dumbing-Down of the left. At the extremes the ‘anti-imperialist’ left actually lends its support to vicious sub-imperialisms such as Milosevic and Saddam.

In truth the post-Communist world cannot be reduced to a manichean struggle between “Imperialism” and “Anti-Imperialism.” There is no “anti-imperialist camp” in which the working class and the democrats merge their forces with General Galtieri, the Mullahs of Iran, the Serb chauvinism of Slobodan Milosevic, Ba’athists, or Islamic fundamentalist forces. The latter, especially, can indeed become a magnet for the poor and oppressed, as a reaction to

Great Power imperialism, but so, in its day, could Stalinism. Socialists cancel themselves out if they support such forces. Politics involves more than just putting a plus sign where the U.S. State Department puts a negative. Things are not that simple anymore. Not by a long chalk.

If “anti-imperialism” is defined as whatever and whoever, at any given moment, is in conflict with the U.S., then one’s politics are defined negatively, but decisively, by the actions of the U.S. An *independent* democratic socialist judgement on events is impossible. You end up cheer-leading fascists.

* When John Pilger says the left ‘should not be choosy’ but should back the fascistic Iraqi ‘resistance’, we should refuse.

* When the left says 9/11 was simply ‘blowback’ for the crimes of US imperialism, we should refuse.

* When Michael Moore asks us to believe that pre-war Iraq was a country of happy kite-flying children, we should refuse.

* When Michael Moore writes ‘there is not terrorist threat, repeat after me, THERE IS NO TERRORIST THREAT’, we should refuse.

* When a warm welcome is extended by the ‘left-wing’ Major of London, Ken Livingstone, to the Fundamentalist cleric, Dr Al-Qaradawi, an anti-semite, and a proponent of the killing of homosexuals and wife-beating, we should refuse.

* When the left fails to rouse itself to oppose Crimes against Humanity in the Balkans, or in Zimbabwe, or in the Sudan, or in North Korea, because to oppose ‘the resistance’ of Slobodan Milosevic or Robert Mugabe or Kim Il Sung is to support ‘imperialism’, we should refuse.

* When the left apologises for the suicide bombers who blow up Jews in coffee bars in Tel Aviv on the grounds that the ‘resistance’ must be supported we should refuse (even as we work for a secure and viable Palestinian state).

* When the left looks at the joy of eight and half million people emerging from totalitarian rule to vote, literally dancing in the streets, and dismisses this as ‘nothing but a fraud’, we should refuse. For that left is, in a profound sense, dead to progressive politics.

* And when a leader of the Stop the War Movement (and the SWP) John Rees, argues that ‘Socialists should unconditionally stand with the oppressed against the oppressor, even if the people who run the oppressed country are undemocratic and persecute minorities, like Saddam Hussein’, we should get angry.

Enough is Enough! Enough apologies for tyrants, enough scabbing on free trade unionists, enough convoluted theoretical theses that always seem to end up blocking our ability to make solidarity with those who need it most.

Each refusal carries a positive charge: pro-human rights above all, pro-international solidarity with the victims of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity, pro-worker, pro-feminism, pro-gay rights, pro-democracy, pro-liberty, pro-social justice. A decent left politics in the post-cold war world will define itself in terms of these positive values.

On such values we can build a culture of solidarity and a political movement.

I thank you again for inviting Labour Friends of Iraq to address the constituency.

I would like to end by inviting you to listen to the Iraqi Communist Party leader Salam Ali, interviewed in the Morning Star on 20 April 2004.

Salam Ali pleaded with the western left to look again at Iraq, asking us to '*understand the complexities and forge alliances with the forces that matter – with your allies in the struggle...*[what] has not been given sufficient attention by the peace movement, not only in Britain but internationally, is solidarity with the democratic forces inside Iraq. They need to develop links with democratic forces. I'm not only talking about political parties - I'm talking about democratic organisations and social movements'.

I hope you will consider affiliating to Labour Friends of Iraq and work with us to twin your constituency with a democratic group in Iraq. We can help you to do that.

Let us together build the kind of solidarity that Salam Ali is asking for.

Let us '*understand the complexities and forge alliances with the forces that matter – with your allies in the struggle*'.

We have a world to win.

Thank you.

(The speech was followed by a lively discussion. Party members raised a series of searching questions about the nature of the 'resistance', the US plans for the Iraqi economy, the dangers of a Iran-style government in Iraq, the importance of making solidarity with the students of Basra, and the prospects for trade unionism. The meeting was rounded off by a speech from Fabian Hamilton, the constituency MP, an opponent of the war and a supporter of Labour Friends of Iraq. Fabian rounded off an inspiring speech with a reminder of the tremendous heroism that had been shown by the Iraqi people on January 30 2005 and urged the meeting to find inspiration from their example. Leeds North East CLP held a collection for Labour Friends of Iraq, raised £40, and wants to get practical solidarity work going with the Iraqi democrats after the General Election).

Endorsements for Labour Friends of Iraq

*Harry Barnes MP and Gary Kent were amongst the first to back the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions after the fall of Saddam. More recently they have been active in **Labour Friends of Iraq** who are highly valued friends of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions. Please support their solidarity initiatives. **Abdullah Muhsin**, International Representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.*

*Good luck to **Labour Friends of Iraq!** We value the work they do for the democrats in Iraq. We hope their influence will spread. They help publicise democratic voices from Iraq and with better funding there will be able to expand this important work. Please consider giving generously. In almost a year and a half writing on my blog on the Internet and working to promote democracy in Iraq I was offered help from many organizations. Most were American and only two were from outside America. Labor Friends of Iraq was one of those two. - **Ali Fadhil**, Iraq Pro-Democracy Party*

*While sections of the left have abandoned the principles of universal human rights and international solidarity, **Labour Friends of Iraq** is standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Iraqi trade unionists, democrats and socialists in their battle to secure democracy, human rights, equality and social justice. LFIQ's concrete, practical solidarity with the left and progressive movements inside Iraq deserves our admiration and support. - **Peter Tatchell**, Human Rights campaigner*

***Labour Friends of Iraq** offer a way for Labour Party members to make a real difference. They have been stalwart defenders of the rights of trade unionists, women and democrats in the new Iraq. - **John Mann**, Labour MP*

*'Many trade unionists opposed the war. But since the fall of Saddam the priority has been to make solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Iraq and to hold the occupying powers to account. **Labour Friends of Iraq** have made an important contribution to both tasks. They have got on with extending practical aid to the fledgling Iraqi unions and blistering criticism to Bush. I hope they go from strength to strength' - **Kevin Curran**, GMB*

*In contrast to the opportunistic 'anti-imperialists' who support the former Ba'athists and religious reactionaries 'resisting' the establishment of the institutions of democracy and civil society in Iraq, which include strong and independent trade unions, **Labour Friends of Iraq** are proof that there is still a left which maintains the tradition of anti-fascism, and moreover, a left which still understands the meaning of the words "international working class solidarity". They are worthy of the support of all who call themselves international socialists. - **Hak Mao** (Australian blogger)*

*"**Labour Friends of Iraq** is doing invaluable work building practical solidarity with democrats and trade unionists in Iraq. It has challenged some of the*

unhealthy impulses of parts of the western left. I urge support for LFIQ's work."

- **Norman Geras**, Professor Emeritus, University of Manchester.

***Labour Friends of Iraq** supports the labour movement and democracy in Iraq. It is as vital for the Left in Britain as it is for the people of Iraq. It shows that there is more to politics than taking sides between America and 'the resistance'. It shows that there is more to the left than the so-called 'anti-imperialism' of those who attack trade unionists. This group belongs to the best traditions of international solidarity. I urge you to support it.* **Robert Fine**, Chair of Sociology, Warwick University

***Labour Friends of Iraq** has upheld the honour of the decent left in scoundrel times. I can think of no better campaign to support."* **Nick Cohen**, Observer

*The left too often defines itself by negative anti-Americanism and so ends up backing the most reactionary forces. **Labour Friends of Iraq** have shown that it is possible to avoid that trap while holding up the left traditions of internationalism, solidarity and human rights - **Linda Grant**, novelist. Guardian writer (personal capacity)*

***Labour Friends of Iraq** are an example of the kind of international solidarity so many parts of the left seem to have forgotten about. What I like about LFIQ above all is that they believe in giving concrete and political support to people involved in a vital struggle - for the establishment of a vibrant labour movement in a new, democratic Iraq. This is exactly the kind of solidarity that left-internationalist bloggers have been calling for - not lecturing, not taking sides on the basis of our own domestic concerns or 'adopting causes' for other reasons but solidarity in the real sense of the world - political, moral and material support and assistance. They deserve the support of all progressives. - **Harry's Place** (blog)*

*Socialists should hardly need reminding of the need for international labour solidarity. But at a time when some on the Western Left seem to have forgotten this abiding principle the work of **Labour Friends of Iraq** is more necessary than ever in helping those courageous Iraqi workers who are striving to build a new democracy." - **Francis Wheen**, writer, journalist, author of Karl Marx*

Labour Friends of Iraq Appeal Fund DONATION FORM ACT NOW!!

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

1. I Want to Join the Labour Friends of Iraq '100 Club'

We want 100 supporters to donate £100 each to Labour Friends of Iraq. £10,000 will fund our next steps to make solidarity with Grassroots Iraq.

Donors will receive regular mailings about the progress of LFIQ, invitations to selected events, and the satisfaction of knowing that their money is helping to revive democracy and labour rights in Iraq. Some will not feel able to donate £100. Each contribution is valued.

* Yes, I would like to become a member of **The 100 Club**. I enclose a cheque for £100 pounds made payable to 'Labour Friends of Iraq'.

* Yes, I would like to make a donation. Please find enclosed a cheque for _____ made payable to 'Labour Friends of Iraq'.

2. I Want to Give £5 a Month to Labour Friends of Iraq

STANDING ORDER MANDATE

Donate £5 a month by standing order to Labour Friends of Iraq. This act of solidarity will transform our work. Donors will receive regular mailings, invitations to selected events, and will have helped LFIQ establish a stable financial base. Of course if you can afford £10 per month, or £100 per month, fantastic! (Fill in the form below and return it to us at the LFIQ Reading address below)

* Yes, I would like to donate £5 / £10 / £20 / £50 / £100 a Month to **Labour Friends of Iraq** by Bankers Order:

To: The Manager of _____ Bank

Address _____

Postcode _____ Sort code __ / __ / __

Please pay **Labour Friends of Iraq** the sum of £ _____ every month / year,.

Starting on _____ (date) and debit my account no. _____

Signed _____

Dated _____

Pay Labour Friends of Iraq, Unity Trust Bank, Nine Brindley Place, Birmingham, B1 2HB, Account No. 20151094, Sort Code 08-60-01.

3. I want to donate to Labour Friends of Iraq online

Go to: <http://www.labourfriendsofiraq.org.uk/donate.shtml>

Please return this cheque or standing order form to Labour Friends of Iraq, PO Box 2421, Reading, United Kingdom, RG1 8WY not to your own bank

For further information ring 0777 4 071 864