

Slave labour conditions in New Zealand's fishing industry

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A group of 32 Indonesian fishermen who last month quit their boat in New Zealand are now faced with deportation. According to a report in the *Press* on July 2, the men left the *Oyang 75* in Christchurch's Lyttelton Harbour, claiming physical and verbal abuse by officers and alleging the company had not paid them fully for their five months on board.

The Korean vessel was chartered by local company Southern Storm Fishing to replace the *Oyang 70*, which sank off the South Island last August with the loss of six seamen. Although Maritime NZ had certified the 38-year-old *Oyang 70* as meeting all safety standards, it sank in calm conditions.

One of the Indonesian fishermen, Slamet, said he had been beaten by an officer after a minor accident. He added that officers hit crew members with ropes if they worked too slowly and made them stand for half a day in one position. Another fisherman, Abor, said he was hit with a paint roller and told to stand in the heat for hours. The men said the beating was the "final straw" and they decided to leave the boat on June 20.

Southern Storm Fishing said last week that the men would soon be served with deportation notices. Lawyers acting for the crew have written to Immigration NZ expressing concern regarding the government's inaction over the crew's plight. They said it was "abhorrent" that the government was not helping the men receive their minimum entitlements.

The incident is the most recent in a long series of complaints by crews, highlighting the atrocious and unsafe conditions on foreign-crewed vessels chartered by New Zealand companies that profit from the \$NZ4

billion-a-year fishing industry. Successive governments, including the 1999-2008 Labour administration, have long been aware of the conditions but nothing has been done.

An investigation by journalist Michael Field, published in the *Sunday Star Times* in April, revealed that "thousands" of fishermen from poor countries were regularly beaten and forced to work for days without rest, earning between \$260 and \$460 a month, before paying much of it over to "agents". One government official cited by Field said skippers confiscated passports so crews could not flee despite the violence.

Writing in a law journal, Auckland University researcher Jennifer Devlin highlighted an incident in 2005 when 10 Indonesian fishermen escaped from the Korean vessel *Sky 75* in Nelson. "They were fed rotten meat and vegetables, told to shower by standing on deck in the waves, made to continue working when sick or injured, and were constantly beaten. They endured all this for wages of \$US200 a month—wages that weren't being paid," she wrote.

The revelations particularly expose the Maori-owned tribal businesses that control 37 percent of the country's fishing industry and are the main users of chartered fishing vessels. Following a 1992 Deed of Settlement, reached under the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process, millions of dollars in cash and fishing quotas were handed over to Maori tribes, ostensibly as recompense for the confiscation of lands during the nineteenth century.

The underlying agenda, however, was to create a

layer of Maori business entrepreneurs, divide workers along racial lines and divert the Maori and non-Maori working class from a unified struggle against the capitalist profit system. While Maori businesses routinely proclaim a “special bond” with indigenous peoples at home and abroad, they have accumulated \$NZ360 billion in assets, through the exploitation of workers of all races.

In the past year alone, 21 Asian and Ukrainian foreign charter vessels (FCVs) have been hired by Maori-owned companies, which contract out their quotas and benefit directly from the barbaric working conditions of the crews.

Maori spokesmen are strenuously defending these practices. Last month, Maori Affairs Minister Peter Sharples, co-leader of the Maori Party, said it “would not be appropriate for the government to interfere” in Maori decision-making over the use of FCVs.

In 2006 a code of practice for foreign crews was revised, requiring employment deals to “align” with New Zealand standards. Compliance was to be monitored by the Labour Department, which checks wage and time records. Yet there has not been a single prosecution for safety or other workplace offences.

Proposals coming from various quarters to “clean up” the industry are based on the use of New Zealand boats and crews, to the exclusion of overseas workers. One domestic fishing industry leader summed up this nationalist perspective by saying the solution was “Kiwi boats, catching Kiwi fish, employing Kiwi crews.”

The profit interests of the domestic operators coincide with the nationalist campaign being waged by the trade unions. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the Maritime Union (MUNZ) have called for a “full audit” of the joint venture fishing industry. Last year the SFWU organised a petition calling for a government inquiry, with a view to seeking tighter regulations.

MUNZ secretary Joe Fleetwood seized on the latest reports of abuse to denounce the “Third World”

practices that have been endemic in the joint-venture industry for years. The union, however, has waged no campaign to provide decent wages and conditions for foreign crews exploited by New Zealand businesses. Instead it has been a long-time advocate of “local” crews in the shipping industry.

The MUNZ no more defends the conditions of local, than foreign, crews. In 2006, the union hailed the code of practice, introduced by the then Labour government, whereby foreign crews fishing in New Zealand waters would receive the country’s minimum wage rate plus \$NZ2 an hour—in exchange for paying union dues. The union lauded this low wage—currently equivalent to \$15 an hour—for making local crews “competitive.”

This divisive nationalist perspective fuels a competitive race to the bottom in which the only beneficiaries are Maori business elites, local fishing operators and the unions that are seeking to expand their membership and dues base. The losers are ordinary workers—both from New Zealand and other countries—whose wages and conditions are being continually depressed.



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