

Three fishermen perish in Southern Ocean fire

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Two recent incidents in the Antarctic Southern Ocean underscore the life-threatening conditions that fishermen, mostly from impoverished countries, are forced to endure. Currently 29 boats from nine countries are licensed to catch toothfish in the Ross Sea, just off Antarctica. The Southern Ocean is one of the most remote and inhospitable places on earth, yet the crews are sent to work in ships that are often little more than rusting hulks.

Three Vietnamese fishermen were killed and seven suffered severe burns when the South Korean toothfish longliner, Jeong Woo 2, caught fire in the Ross Sea, 3,700 kilometres southeast of New Zealand. According to surviving crew members, the three men did not make it out of the vessel's accommodation block after it caught fire early in the morning on January 11.

The injured survivors were taken aboard a US research ship and transferred to the Antarctic research station at McMurdo, before being airlifted to Christchurch for urgent medical treatment. Two Vietnamese and one Indonesian crew members were severely injured—one with deep burns to 50 percent of his body, and another with 30 percent burns. The remaining four injured crew had lesser burns. The 26-year old fishing vessel was still on fire several days later, and was subsequently abandoned. The remaining 30 crew, from South Korea, Russia, Indonesia and Vietnam, were rescued by the sister ship, Jeong Woo 3.

On December 16, a Russian fishing boat, the Sparta, with a multinational crew of 32, was stranded in the Ross Sea after it struck submerged ice, which holed its hull. The stricken ship remained in danger of sinking in the frigid waters for 12 days. Heavy ice prevented help

from reaching the vessel, forcing the crew to pump out near-frozen seawater to keep the ship afloat. Repairs were finally completed with assistance from a South Korean icebreaker.

There has been a litany of mishaps, ship sinkings, deaths, industrial accidents and gross exploitation within the fishing industry. In August 2010, the ageing Oyang 70, under charter to New Zealand company Southern Storm Fishing, sank 700 kilometres southeast of Dunedin. Six of its 45 crew lost their lives. Although Maritime NZ reported that the Korean ship met relevant safety standards and had passed a foreign charter inspection, it capsized in calm conditions. There has been no explanation for the disaster and an inquest is still to be held.

In December 2010, the South Korean boat Insung No 1 suddenly sank in the Ross Sea, about 1,850 kilometres north of McMurdo Station. Only half the 42 crew members survived.

The *Dominion Post* published details in January from a report into the sinking of the Insung No 1 by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which controls fishing in the Southern Ocean. The report noted that the ship capsized after 3-metre waves hit its side, flooding the upper deck through its open net-haul shutter. The engine room was submerged and the vessel capsized in less than half an hour.

The investigation found a number of safety faults on the vessel. The crew came from six countries. Many were hired through separate agencies, and the boat's owner, Insung Corporation, had only partial knowledge

of their names and nationalities. The safety guidebook was written only in Korean; emergency and lifeboat instructions were only in Korean and English. “This left the crew unprepared for accidents like this one,” the report said. At the time of the emergency, the main water pump was not working. There were several criticisms of the ship’s captain—particularly his failure to close the net-hauler opening to stop water flowing in.

The report did not, however, indict the company for the state of the ship or its management. As a result, the Korea Maritime Safety Tribunal was able to issue a series of minor “recommendations” regarding procedures in harsh weather and noted that safety material should be written in languages suitable for all the crew. Given the exploitative conditions and breaches of regulations that prevail on these vessels, the recommendations will prove to be worthless.

Last year, New Zealand’s conservative National Party government ordered an inquiry into the deep sea fishing industry after a series of complaints by crews, some of whom had jumped ship over their atrocious treatment. Foreign Crewed Vessels (FCVs), flagged in Asia and chartered by New Zealand fishing companies, operate with about 2,000 low-wage crews. Successive governments, including the 1999-2008 Labour administration, have long been aware of conditions on FCVs but nothing has been done.

An investigation by the *Sunday Star Times* last April revealed that hundreds of fishermen from oppressed countries were regularly beaten and forced to work for days without rest, earning between \$NZ260 and \$460 a month before paying much of it to agents. According to journalist Michael Field, the workers were fishing in “rusting boats turned into high seas sweatshops”. (See: “Slave labour conditions in New Zealand’s fishing industry”)

The government’s inquiry, which is due to issue its report this month, was not established from any genuine concern over the plight of fishermen in New Zealand’s \$4 billion-a-year industry. Chaired by former Labour government cabinet minister Paul Swain, it was designed to divert international criticism.

The government was primarily concerned at the

damage New Zealand was suffering to its reputation. It followed a US State Department international report into forced labour on fishing charters and a subsequent visit to Wellington by US Human Trafficking Ambassador Luis CdeBaca. American officials were reportedly “alarmed” at a lack of recognition of trafficking in New Zealand.

The Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) also agitated for an inquiry from the nationalist standpoint that foreign vessels should be excluded from the fishing waters, with preference given to New Zealand ships, manned by crews who pay union dues. The union, however, has waged no campaign to demand decent wages and conditions for foreign crews exploited by New Zealand operators.

The “concerns” over the conditions of fishermen are entirely hypocritical and bound up with competition over fishing markets. The real face of the industry was revealed by the submission to the inquiry by the employers’ organisation, the NZ Fishing Industry Council (SeaFIC), which highlighted the “race to the bottom” that was driving working conditions and the extraction of profits in every industry.

SeaFIC bluntly argued that the fishing industry needed more cheap labour. Hiring Asian crews was no different, it said, to companies moving to low-wage countries. “Many New Zealand businesses have exported jobs ... to other countries with wage rates considerably less than minimum wage rates in New Zealand,” the council asserted. It named Fisher and Paykel, Fonterra and Icebreaker as examples and cited Air New Zealand, Qantas, coastal shipping, and the local film industry as instances of employers using cheap labour within the country.



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