

South Korean fishing vessel sinks, killing dozens

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A fishing trawler operated by a South Korean company sank Monday off the coast of Russia, with most of its crew missing and considered dead. The sinking and loss of life is yet another tragic reminder that as far as the capitalist class is concerned, the drive for profit outweighs the safety and lives of workers.

The Oryong 501 went down in the Bering Sea, leaving 16 people confirmed dead, while 37 others remain unaccounted for. The day the fishing trawler sank, 7 people were rescued and are said to be in good condition. However, a sailor plucked from the frigid waters later died of hypothermia. Another 11 bodies were found Wednesday and 4 more on Thursday near the site of the sinking. It is unlikely that any of the missing will be found alive.

The ship was reportedly carrying a crew of 35 Indonesians, 13 Filipinos, 11 South Koreans and one Russian inspector. They departed from the Korean port of Busan on July 10 in search of pollock, a popular type of fish. It is believed that the ship was flooded by waves as high as 13 feet, then began to list and sink.

Artur Rets, who is leading the rescue team from the Russian port of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, said of the Oryong 501: “The storage area was flooded, then the hold; the rudder and fuel system jammed.” Temperatures in the waters where the boat sank are as low as -10 degrees Celsius, meaning the crew members would have been unable to withstand the cold for much more than 15 minutes, according to Rets.

Sajo Industries, the company that operated the Oryong 501, was quick to try to deflect blame onto the ship’s captain, claiming he did not issue the evacuation order soon enough. Company director Im Chae-ok told a public briefing on Tuesday: “The captain is the one who makes judgments based on his reading of the situations at sea. After the sinking was reported, we

wanted to send other ships (to rescue them), but we couldn’t due to high waves that slowed down the speed of those ships.”

Furious family members gathered for the briefing, with some denouncing the captain for failing to give a prompt evacuation order as the ship initially began to sink. However, others placed the blame squarely at the feet of the company. One family member shouted at company officials: “Stop blaming the captain! The company should have ordered an evacuation in such a crisis.”

Another family member said: “The fisheries firm keeps shifting the responsibility for the evacuation order to the ship’s captain, but he can’t issue the order before the firm directs him to do so.” The company was also accused of failing to organize rescue efforts in a timely manner.

The Oryong 501 was an older vessel. It was in operation for 36 years, an indication that Sajo Industries was cutting corners by not updating its fleet with newer and safer equipment and vessels. In fact, this is an industry-wide practice. According to the Korea Overseas Fisheries Association, 91.2 percent of the country’s 342 deep-sea fishing vessels are more than 21 years old.

Furthermore, workers who come from Southeast Asia to work in South Korea are often heavily exploited, with conditions bordering on slavery, and face racist and degrading treatment. In the fishing industry, the situation is worse. The abuse of migrant fishermen takes place on vessels far out at sea with no escape. Fishermen in some cases endure 20-hour shifts with little time to rest in between.

Sajo Industries has had its share of accidents and been accused in the past of human and labor rights abuses. In August 2010, another of Sajo’s fishing trawlers, the

Oyang 70, sank off the coast of New Zealand, killing six. In 2011, 32 Indonesian fishermen walked off another Sajo vessel, alleging forced labor and unpaid wages, as well as physical and sexual abuse.

The South Korean government tacitly endorsed the exploitation of migrant fishermen in May when the Seobu District Court handed down suspended sentences to former Sajo officials who had forged documents claiming they had paid the fishermen.

According to the *Korea Times*, there are approximately 700,000 migrant workers in the fishing, agricultural, and manufacturing industries. They face horrendous treatment, including physical and sexual abuse, the seizure of their documents, and being forced into debt bondage. In effect, they are enslaved by Korean companies.

Mutuma Ruteere, UN special rapporteur on racism, documented in October some of the extreme abuses. After speaking with foreign fishermen in Busan, Ruteere told a press conference that these workers were given the “most difficult tasks and get paid less than their Korean counterparts,” while enduring verbal and physical abuse from the ship owners.

Ruteere called on the South Korean government to implement anti-discrimination legislation to counter the foul treatment migrant workers are forced to endure. However, governments in Seoul have a long history of whipping up anti-immigrant racism, based on the national myths that Koreans are racially pure, and therefore genetically superior to other ethnicities.

Far from seeking to end discrimination, the South Korean government uses it, and racism in general, to justify the exploitation of foreign workers, ensuring cheap labor for companies. At the same time, racism is used to divide these workers from their Korean counterparts, who are similarly exploited and increasingly forced into low-wage, temporary positions in the name of being economically competitive.



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