

# Report highlights modern slave labour in Pacific fishing industry

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A new report has found that fishing companies operating in the Pacific are doing little to stop slavery on their boats. The tuna industry in particular is rife with allegations of modern slavery in its supply chains, with few protections for workers against forced labour.

The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre report, *All at sea: An evaluation of company efforts to address modern slavery in Pacific supply chains of canned tuna*, surveyed dozens of the world's largest canned tuna brands. It concluded that while more than four in five have published statements on human rights, this “doesn't translate” into efforts to end slavery.

The global fishing sector, the report asserts, “is rife with allegations of abuse—human trafficking, debt bondage, withheld wages, physical and sexual abuse, extreme sleep deprivation, medical neglect and even murder. In some instances, fishers have reportedly been held captive at sea for years at a time.”

With the COVID-19 pandemic, tuna sales have skyrocketed as consumers world-wide have stocked-up on canned goods. Yet the fishermen working in the multi-billion dollar industry, estimated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to number 40 million, face some of the worst abuses. Nearly half a million seafarers are trapped at sea due to travel restrictions, border closures and other measures introduced by governments to contain the spread of the coronavirus, a situation described by the UN as a “humanitarian crisis.”

Phil Bloomer, executive director of the Centre, declared: “Too many Pacific tuna fishermen that put food on our tables face abuse and confinement every day. Put simply, the brands who put the cans on their shelves are failing to provide adequate duty of care to these workers who furnish their products.”

This is simply an evasion—vast numbers of seafarers,

including boys, are ruthlessly exploited to sustain the profits of global conglomerates which rely on the most oppressed social layers, mainly from Asia, to toil in their distant-water fleets. Yet the report eschews the fundamental class issues at stake. It excises any reference to the working class and declares the issue is one of “human rights”—a term more palatable to the political and corporate elites the business-oriented Centre is seeking to influence.

Among the 35 companies surveyed, representing over 80 different tuna “brands,” the report found “glacial progress on actions which really matter to workers trapped in modern slavery.” Only six companies have revised due-diligence processes in two years; oversight of recruitment is “almost non-existent”; just half a dozen have policies protecting migrant workers; most lack remediation plans to address reports of slavery, and only two prohibit vessels using flags of convenience. Less than a third of company complaint systems are accessible to supply chain workers.

The worst offending companies include major suppliers to the metropolitan markets—Safcol, Costco, Walmart, Ocean Brands, Starkist, Alliance Select Foods, American Tuna, Pegasus Food and C-Food International.

Several harrowing cases, based on interviews with fishing crews, are cited. These include:

In 2020, a number of Indonesian crew deaths reportedly occurred aboard the Long Xing 629, as well as on other fleet vessels operated by the Chinese-owned Dalian Ocean Fishing. Crew members told of brutal conditions, including being physically assaulted. The vessel participated in numerous at-sea trans-shipments allowing it to stay out longer, with some working on board for over a year without docking at port.

Also in 2020, a fisheries observer from Kiribati was

found dead in his cabin on the Taiwanese purse seiner, Win Far 636, operated by Kuo Hsiung Fishery. His death is alleged to have been caused by a massive blunt trauma to the head, but nobody has been prosecuted. As an observer he monitored endangered species by-catch and illegal dumping. He was the tenth Pacific fisheries observer reported to have died at sea in the last decade.

Two Indonesian seafarers also spoke of their recent experiences in Fiji. They worked on Chinese-owned and flagged vessels, and had been hired by recruiters who deducted fees from their salaries and retained their personal official documentation. On arrival in Fiji, they were taken to their vessels without being allowed to report to the Indonesian Embassy.

The two men detailed inhumane conditions, which included living in close quarters and working more than 20 hours per day. They described their meals as “disgusting and inedible.” One of them was forced to work when he had a “finger cut so deep that my bones were visible and seemed to be about to break off.” Their concerns were consistently suppressed and hidden from inspectors.

Other reports are emerging from Fiji. Radio NZ reported last month that 20 Filipino workers accused Goundar Shipping, Fiji’s largest ferry operator, of abusive treatment and non-payment. They were brought to Fiji almost three years ago and found themselves working in unsanitary, unsafe conditions seven days a week. The men claimed the company held back their passports and refused to supply tickets home after they raised concerns. A Philippines manning agency, Able Maritime, has since had its licence suspended.

In another case, an Indonesian fisherman on board the Yu Shun 88, a Taiwanese flagged tuna longliner, has recently been repatriated from Fiji. Auckland human rights lawyer Karen Harding said the fishermen on the boat, which carries up to 17 people, were forced to work for 18–20 hours a day in “abject” conditions. The captain had taken the passport, the seaman’s book and withheld pay as a security bond. Beds were infested with fleas, food was spoiled and there was no fresh soap or water for showers. *All at sea* maintains that if these companies would only adopt the proper policies and procedures, all these issues could be resolved. A handful of successful companies, it contends “have shown it is both commercially viable and a moral imperative to emancipate workers caught in modern

slavery.” Governments should be pressured to “mandate comprehensive human rights due diligence by companies, throughout their operations and supply chains.”

This perspective is entirely bankrupt. The explosion of oppressive working conditions, low pay and extreme hardship is an international phenomenon, across all industries. It is a product of the relentless drive for escalating profits at the heart of globalised capitalist relations of production and cannot be addressed by appeals to the ruling elites.

New Zealand trade unions have called on the country’s Labour-led government to “put Fiji on notice” over the Goundar case. International Transport Workers Federation spokesperson Paul Tolich said NZ unions supported calls by their Fijian counterparts for “greater recognition” by the Fiji government so they could “better stand up for all workers, migrant or local.” “Stronger unions are the best way to support workers to speak up without fear,” Tolich declared.

In fact, the trade unions have never waged any campaign to demand decent wages and conditions for foreign crews, including those exploited by their “own” New Zealand operators. The reactionary nationalist position of the Maritime Union of New Zealand is that foreign vessels should be excluded from the country’s fishing waters, with preference given to New Zealand ships, manned by crews who pay union dues.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has failed to condemn any of Fiji’s frequent attacks on basic rights. Under Labour’s pro-Washington “Pacific Reset” policy, the New Zealand government is cementing diplomatic relations with Fijian leader Frank Bainimarama in order to better establish him as a bulwark against China’s influence in the Pacific.



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