



The Wi-Fi NOW for Fishers' Rights Campaign

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For nearly a decade, labor abuses, including all eleven of the ILO's indicators of forced labor, have been documented in Taiwan's billion-dollar distant water fishing industry. Migrant fishers from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam who work in Taiwan's distant water fleet, which is the second largest in the world, suffer dire working conditions while isolated on the open seas for up to 10 months — or illegally longer — at a time. The workers toil for more than 14 hours a day, and despite their relentless labor, their salaries are \$550 USD per month, which is the lowest among various migrant groups in Taiwan. This is the result of Taiwan's discriminatory two-tiered employment system, which excludes migrant fishers in distant water fishing from key labor protections under the Labor Standards Act.

Meanwhile, health and safety violations are pervasive on board these vessels. Fishers report having limited access to food and water and resorting to collecting rainwater and condensation from air conditioning units for basic necessities like showering. The nature of their work is also extremely dangerous, making them susceptible to physical injuries and illnesses, yet fishers lack access to healthcare on board. As a result, there are heart-wrenching reports of vessels arriving in ports with the lifeless bodies of workers who succumbed to injuries or illness because they were not addressed in time, as well as incidents of fishers falling or jumping overboard and going missing. In addition, mental health issues due to isolation are prevalent; for example, a Filipino fisher took his own life due to overwhelming stress just a month ago.

While working what is known as one of the most dangerous jobs in the world, migrant fishers remain completely isolated, without the ability to communicate with their families and friends, or to report problems to their labor unions, government authorities, or advocates when

needed. Because real-time resolution of grievances, such as non-payment of wages to fishers' families, is impossible, fishers must wait months until they return to land, in which case it is often too late. For migrant fishers returning to port who have raised issues or seek to raise issues upon arrival, employers can unilaterally terminate their contracts and deport them without compensation for the remaining months of their agreements. This is because the migrant fishers are hired as temporary workers under a tied-visa scheme, in which their visas are bound to their employer.

The Indonesian Seafarers Gathering Forum (FOSPI), a self-organized group of 2,300 Indonesian fishers in Donggang, Taiwan, regularly receives these distressing reports from migrant fishers. Based on their experience, FOSPI's top demand to improve fishers' lives is access to free and secure Wi-Fi for all fishers on board Taiwanese distant water fishing vessels, which would allow them to communicate with their families and contact their unions and other advocates to see remedies in real time. They advocate for the Wi-Fi to be provided in line with the following criteria to ensure it is accessible consistent with labor rights: (1) mandatory Wi-Fi with penalties for non-compliance; (2) commitment to fishers' fundamental labor rights; (3) guidelines on reasonable access to Wi-Fi; (4) co-design and co-enforcement of a vessel-level conflict resolution process; and (5) improved labor enforcement.

This demand is grounded in the recognition that Wi-Fi access is necessary for fishers to be able to exercise their freedom of association and right to collective bargaining, which is critical for the defense of their other fundamental labor rights under international law. Lack of Wi-Fi communication for fishers on board vessels itself violates fishers' rights to freedom of association by de facto creating a "no union zone" at sea, which leads to violations of fishers' fundamental rights to work in a healthy and safe workplace without forced labor and without discrimination based on national origin or migrant status.

Recognizing that Wi-Fi is a precondition for migrant fishers' to exercise their fundamental labor rights, FOSPI has launched a global labor rights campaign called the "Wi-Fi NOW for Fishers' Rights at Sea" campaign, in collaboration with Global Labor Justice - International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF), Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR), Stella Maris Kaohsiung, Serve the People Association (SPA), and Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC). The campaign has garnered the support of a broad coalition of diverse allies in Taiwan, the United States, and around the world to urge the Taiwanese government to make access to Wi-Fi for fishers a legal requirement for all vessels in its distant water fishing fleet, underscoring the need for mandatory and regulated Wi-Fi access to hold vessel owners and captains accountable.

In light of the severe labor rights violations in Taiwan's distant water fishing industry, there is an urgent need for international solidarity and support. The conditions described above represent a stark example of hyper-exploitation within a largely deregulated industry that is in pressing need of comprehensive reform. Taiwan's distant water fishing industry is a critical frontier for the pursuit of fair and just labor practices in today's global economy. Notably, the European Union (EU) stands as one of the top buyers of Taiwanese seafood, making it crucial to address these issues collectively and ensure fair competition globally.

To that end, FOSPI and its core campaign partners ask the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) for their support and solidarity. The ITF, IUF and IUF can provide an understanding of how EU regulations work to help protect fishers in the EU fishing fleet and down their value chains, as well as help facilitate meetings with the fishing sector, the EU commission, and seafood brands and retailers.