

FISH WORKERS AND TAIWAN'S DISTANT-WATER FISHING INDUSTRY

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Introduction

Taiwan is an island surrounded by seas. Traditional and local inshore fishing has all but disappeared, due to Taiwan's industrial development and overzealous economic policy. The natural order of taking from and returning to the sea has been destroyed. Owing to overfishing and industrial pollution, the island's marine resources have been significantly depleted. Because of this, Taiwan's fisheries sector has over the past 30 years steadily developed a highly mechanized distant-water fleet.

Painful setbacks have occurred along with the growth of this distant-water fishing industry. Powerful big business concerns control Taiwan's fishing industry. These companies are motivated by an economic greed, which has little regard for the value of marine life or even human life.

Aggressive fishing practices and extensive use of driftnets reflect these boat owners' greed. Abusive and unjust conditions for fishworkers, Taiwanese as well as foreign, are also products of this greed. I briefly describe here the conditions fishworkers face on Taiwanese distant-water vessels.

Profile of a typical Taiwanese DWV fishworker

According to government reports, the majority of Taiwanese DWV fishworkers are between the ages of 35 and 40. This statistic appears to be rather high, given the additional datum that 98% of first-time fishworkers are junior high graduates or young men recently discharged from the country's mandatory military service.

Government statistics also reveal that over 62% have worked on fishing boats less than five years. Given the high turnover on the boats, it is perhaps difficult to get accurate data. A figure of 600,000 is given as to the total fishworker population.

I have found the majority of fishworkers to be younger than the official statistical average. Many of them go one or two voyages, discover the long and dangerous working condition low wages and other inequities and never sail again. A high percentage of them are Aborigine a small non-Chinese minority in Taiwan. Due to racial discrimination, poor education and lack economic

opportunities in their home villages, many Aborigines are channeled into the won jobs when they migrate to the cities.

There is also a growing percentage of foreign workers on Taiwanese DWVs. The nationalities most often represented are mainland Chinese Filipino, Thai, South African and Mauritian. While the government now allows 30% of crews to be composed of foreigners, we have many reports that sometimes as high as 50% to 75% of some crews *are* foreign.

Aborigine as well as Taiwanese fishworkers generally have a low educational level; many of them are illiterate. The Aborigine fishworkers come mostly from agricultural backgrounds. About 10% of the Taiwanese are from fishing families. The majority of them do not know how to swim and possess only a minimal knowledge of life-saving techniques, first aid and emergency fire procedures. They receive no training in operating equipment prior to their first voyage.

Over 60% of Taiwanese fishermen work more than 12 hours per day, according to information gathered in 1989 by the National Kaohsiung Institute of Marine Technology. In the case of trawler workers, fishing time takes between five and six hours a day, with 12 hours required to bring in the nets and sort the harvest.

Squid longer and six fishermen work through the night with hours. Fishworkers sleep between four hours a day and cannot rest by turns.

The following is a typical day for squid fishermen:

08:00-09:00 breakfast

09:00-12:00 mend fishing nets, repairs, chores

12:00-13:00 lunch

13:00-15:00 rest

15:30-17:30 put out nets

18:00-19:00 dinner

19:00-06:00 raise nets process the catch and load it into refrigeration hole; repeat process through the night.

The work is monotonous and repetitive. Much of it does not require special skills. Given the lack of sleep and overwork involved, this kind of mechanized fishing produces boredom, which increases the chance of injury. Communication difficulties among the crew also produce safety problems—Aborigine and Taiwanese fishermen do not speak the same language; the presence of foreign fishermen also complicates communication.

Taiwanese ships are unsafe. The Kaohsiung Fishing Association reports that over the past 10 years more than 2,000 ships have been lost at sea and that more than 3,000 men have died, an average of 24 men per month. There are several reasons for this record: a large proportion of Taiwan's fleet is old (over 20 years); safety equipment is lacking (life rafts, life preservers, etc.); many vessels purchased from Japan at cheap prices are substandard; officials are bribed to falsify safety inspection of ships; crews are untrained.

Over the past 10 years, more than 6,514 fishworkers on Taiwanese vessels have been detained in other countries. While the crews have no part in decisions about where or how fishing operations will be carried out, they are viewed as criminals by the countries that detain them, often under poor conditions. The fishworker's contract does not even mention detention, and usually all family support is stopped. Because the voyage ultimately loses money, fishermen return to port deep in debt to the company. Since his documents are in the hands of the company, there is no way to repay the boat owner except to sign up again for another voyage.

Distant-water voyages last between one and three years. Sometimes the men are gone as long as five years at a time. These long time periods often cause difficulties for the men, their wives and their families.

Fishworkers experience a great deal of loneliness and isolation during their long-distance voyages. Many rely on alcohol as a distraction. Tensions have a way of mounting among the crew, especially when there is pressure to work harder and harder: Reports of fights, violence, mutiny and murder are growing more common.

The economic factors

Only 70% of Taiwan DWV fishworkers are guaranteed a fixed wage for their labour. In fact, the majority of fishworkers in Taiwan are not seen as employees but as "partners" of the fishing company. The "bonus system" in Taiwan is deceptive. The fishworkers take all the risks and the fishing companies take all the profits.

Monthly support payments are issued to the family after the ship leaves port. While these payments are supposed to total US\$400, case work by the PCT Fishermen's Service Center reveals that this is seldom

the case. These payments, however, are not a "salary" but in fact a "loan".

At the end of the voyage, all expenses (like food, fuel, repairs, insurance, etc. which are often calculated by the company at two or three times their actual cost) are subtracted from the sale of the catch. The company then receives 60% to 65%. What remains is divided among the crew of 17-20 men, with the captain and officers receiving two or three shares. If the fishworker's "share" of the catch is less than the total amount of family support payments, then he owes the company the balance.

There is also the problem of introduction brokers. Currently, there is a serious labour shortage on Taiwanese ships. Many crew members are recruited by crime syndicates and often in league with the fishing companies. They especially prey upon Aborigine youths, luring them onto the ships with alcohol, false promises of big salaries and women. Introduction fees range from US\$1,400 to \$3,200.

These agencies will also take the fisherman's chop (official name seal), ID card, fishing license and other important papers and turn them over to the fishing company. Boat owners have been known to take out loans using fishermen's documents. Using these papers, the agency controls everything and the fisherman never even sees the terms of his contract; 85% of all fishermen never sign their own contracts. Those who do sign their contracts usually do not understand what they are signing.

While government statistics released by the Kaohsiung Management Department claim that fishermen average between US\$480 and \$840 per month, these figures are grossly inflated. Based on five years of case work, Fishermen's Service Centre (FSC) data disclose that the current monthly income earned by fishermen is between US\$260 and \$300. Conversations with foreign workers docked in Kaohsiung reveal that they normally earn roughly half that amount, but sometimes they are not paid at all.

Taiwanese fishworkers are entitled to Fishermen's Insurance, but this plan is inadequate. In case of death, US\$4,000 is awarded. Other money provided by the Fishery Union totals less than \$800. If the fishworker has participated in the programme of labour insurance for more than two years, additional benefits are available. A personal safety insurance is also available, but is not compulsory.

Fishworkers are insured only for risk at sea. Once the boats enter the port for repair, maintenance, etc., or prior to sailing, expenses incurred by any injury or accident happening on land must be borne by the fishworker himself. Labour insurance does not cover

medical expenses if the illness or injury is considered to be unconnected to a fishing operation. When fishworkers are ill or injured, they are often treated with only patent medicines. Many fishworkers suffer irreparable handicaps because of postponing emergency medical treatment.

Retirement benefits are available but rarely received. A fishworker must work at least 15 years with the same company before receiving retirement funds, beginning at age 55. Fishermen who fulfill that condition may receive between US\$14,000 and \$16,000.

Concluding remarks

In my opinion, the abuses of Taiwan's fishing industry occur because of the capitalistic greed of the fishing companies, lack of government regulation and failure of fishworkers to organize. Companies feel justified in using cheap labour, local or foreign, if it turns a profit. They are allowed to do whatever they want by a government driven by the same capitalistic goals and powerless to regulate an industry growing more are more unjust.

Moreover, given Taiwan's unique political isolation from the world community, there is little motivation to observe world standards of behaviour.

The highest fishery administration unit is the Council of Agriculture (COA) of the Executive Yuan, It is indica-

tive that in 30 years of distant-water fisheries development, the COA has yet to enact a body of laws governing the industry. Fisheries regulations in Taiwan are based on Japanese laws dating back to 1920. Known as "administrative orders", fishery regulations amount to "suggestions" at best and do not carry of the force of law.

There are also local Fishing Administrations located in Taiwan's major ports. The Kaohsiung Association is a non-governmental body which processes insurance and provides a limited number of services to fishworkers. Unfortunately, it is totally dominated by boat owners and is not representative of fishworkers' concerns. When a fisherman makes a claim against a company, there is no tribunal where his case can be heard. If a company refuses to negotiate, it cannot be compelled by law to address the issue.

The failure of Taiwan's DWV workers to organize is a serious but understandable problem. During the 38 years of martial law on the island, unions were forbidden. Fishworkers, on the whole, lack confidence that they can change the system. Due to the long periods of absence from home and quick turnover of personnel, attempts to form a truly representative union have failed. One such effort of deep-sea fishermen was immediately co-opted by government officials. The FSC staff is now making progress in forming a more representative fishworkers' group to ensure greater benefits and safer working conditions for all crews.

