

Deep seas, long hours

THE CONDITION OF FISHWORKERS ON DISTANT WATER VESSELS

If proof was needed that fishworkers on distant water vessels (DWVs) faced appalling conditions of work, the testimonies and papers presented at ICSF's international workshop on the subject in January 1991 (Manila-the Philippines) provided it.

Clearly, there was a need to analyse in greater depth the related issues of recruitment, remuneration and work conditions of fishworkers aboard DWVs. Accordingly, ICSF organised a follow-up workshop in Mauritius from 31 August to 5 September 1992. Specifically, it hoped to set up a task force, with scope and objectives defined, to go into these issues.

To broaden the scope of reference, the workshop decided to use the term industrial fishing vessels (IFVs), rather than distant water vessels. This would include all vessels employing foreign labour from developing countries and/or engaged in joint ventures in developing countries and/or fishing in the EEZs of their waters. Also included are vessels operating in national waters, employing at least five workers on board, and which are capable of fishing beyond the territorial waters.

As the workshop presentations made clear, no country could claim to be free of exploitation of fishworkers on industrial fishing vessels. The degree of hardship might differ, as did the amount of remuneration, but these did not substantially alter the common fact of difficult working conditions.

Filipino fishworkers employed in Taiwan, for instance, work at least 16 hours a day and are often cheated of their salaries which are paid through intermediary recruiting agents. In the Philippines itself, where there is a surplus of trained seafarers, there is no legislation to protect fishworkers. The government seems interested only in earning foreign exchange.

In Madagascar, recruitment is done directly by foreign fishing companies, often through tripartite negotiations involving the workers' organizations too. But salaries are poor, just as they are in Senegal too.

Reunion, which has adopted the French legislation system, provides for health insurance, social security and retirement benefits for fishworkers. However, there are instances of illegal recruitment from Madagascar and Mayotte, especially in longlining. The proposed fleet reduction in the EEC countries, local fishermen fear, would lead to the deployment of European vessels in the underexploited oceans of the world.

In Mauritius, the minority employed on foreign vessels are paid better than South African and Filipino fishworkers. But work conditions are deplorable, especially on Taiwanese longliners. One-sided contracts, old and derelict vessels, and the absence of protective legislation add to the hardship.

In India, where most of the IFVs are trawlers operating in the deep sea prawn fisheries, the workers are usually directly recruited (though of late, recruiting agencies have sprung up for the emerging joint ventures). In addition to a salary and a share of the total catch, the workers get a month's holiday. Though Indian conditions seem currently the best, what is worrying is whether these can be maintained in the situation of overfishing.

Apart from India and Reunion, where conditions appear slightly better, it is clear that IFVs of the industrialised countries tried to maximise profits by hiring cheap labour -sometimes through joint ventures and licensing arrangements.

In view of these oppressive and exploitative conditions, the workshop proposed the formation of an international task force to study and document these conditions as well as to suggest campaign programmes to redress these problems. It will be supported by regional task forces in Taiwan, the Philippines and Mauritius.

If this effort throws up studied responses to the problems of fishworkers in IFVs, their cause would have been well served. And, as concerned people hope, they can then look forward to a more rewarding livelihood. ■