

Taiwan: DOES NEW LABOR DEAL MEAN MIGRANT FISHERMEN WILL BE ABLE TO ACCESS WIFI?

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A NEW AGREEMENT between Taiwanese seafood associations and Indonesian labor unions will take effect this month. Significantly, one of the provisions of the agreement is that Wifi will be implemented on fishing vessels.

[A campaign to call](#) for the implementation of wi-fi on fishing vessels has been ongoing from Taiwanese civil society groups for some time. In particular, migrant fishermen often spend months, if not years at sea without returning to shore. To this extent, migrant fishermen carry out work under conditions that have been labeled modern slavery, seeing as despite working twenty or more hours a day, they sometimes do not receive pay and face the threat of physical violence on the high seas.

The lack of wi-fi access for many migrant fishermen cuts them off from friends and family for months at a time. This isolation contributes to the stresses of work under conditions that are already harsh and hazardous. This also makes it difficult for migrant fishermen to verify if their families have been paid.

To this extent, migrant fishermen are unable to report labor abuses that they face without wi-fi access. Although migrant workers in Taiwan are allowed to organize labor unions, seeing as they are at sea for months at a time, migrant fishermen are usually unable to contact their labor unions in the event of labor abuses without wi-fi access. As such, the right to organize has been criticized as just for show without wi-fi access by migrant worker advocates.

The agreement was between the Serikat Pekerja Perikanan Indonesia (SPPI), as well as the Taiwan Tuna Association (TTA) and the Taiwan Squid and Saury Fisheries Association. The provision of the agreement is that the SPPI will train and staff fishermen for the two associations. But progress on the deal was previously impeded by the fact that Indonesian and Taiwanese labor brokers could not decide on how to split profits between both sides. It is claimed that the agreement will also provide a mechanism for fishermen to push for further benefits through the SPPI.

Migrant worker advocates have questioned whether the SPPI can pressure Taiwanese ship owners, however, for an improvement in labor conditions. The TTA was also until recently against wi-fi for fishermen, though it now claims it will install wi-fi on its three hundred vessels by the end of the year.

It costs 8,000 to 15,000 USD to install wi-fi on fishing vessels, which cost 500,000 USD for smaller vessels and above 1,000,000 USD for larger vessels. As such, it has been pointed out that the cost of installing wi-fi is only a small fraction of the cost to build a fishing vessel. Moreover, over three years, the Fisheries Agency has provided 300,000 NTD to specific fishing vessels for wi-fi

installation, which is also subsidized at 8,000 NT per month, but many vessels did not take this up.

Yet broader questions remain about how fishermen will have access to wi-fi. Namely, on some vessels that already have wi-fi, this is kept out of the access of fishermen themselves, with only captains having access. This occurs at the same time as fishermen have their passports and other crucial documentation held onboard fishing vessels.

Migrant worker advocates have sought to call attention to the need for further protections for migrant fishermen on Taiwan's distant water fishermen ahead of trade talks for the 21st Century Trade Initiative that will last until May 3rd. Specifically, America has cited concern over the use of forced labor in Taiwan's fishing fleet, which provides a point of leverage in that the Taiwanese government and fishing industry is highly sensitive to international criticism. This includes Taiwanese fish being listed as goods produced by forced labor by [the US Department of Labor](#), as well [as a yellow card](#) from the European Union, though this was since rescinded.

Ironically, the US is expected to take a relatively light hand to Taiwan in order to differentiate it from China, but labor authorities in Taiwan have sometimes tried to deflect charges regarding forced labor by claiming that Chinese vessels were responsible for such cases, or that the US had confused Taiwan and China when it came to forced labor as it occurs in Xinjiang and in other places.

It is to be seen as to whether trade talks between the US and Taiwan can be leveraged on for migrant worker protections, then. This is to be seen, while it is possible that an agreement will be arrived at in the coming days.

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