



ILAB

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Bureau of International Labor Affairs | Strengthening Labor Conditions and Promoting Good Jobs in the Fishing Sector

We advance respect for workers' rights and decent work in the global seafood supply chain through partnerships, cutting-edge research, innovative programming, and enforcement.

THE CHALLENGE

The seafood industry includes some of the most critical global supply chains for food security and employment. The industry employs millions of workers in fishing, transport, and processing and is important for the United States and developing nations.

A growing body of evidence, including ILAB's own reporting, documents severe human rights abuses, including forced labor and dangerous conditions onboard vessels and in seafood processing. Fishers, many of whom are migrant workers, describe misleading recruitment tactics and high recruitment fees, confiscated passports, long hours, withheld pay, unsafe living and working conditions, and being forced to work against their will, often under threat of violence. These abuses are particularly prevalent in Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing, where operators often seek to increase profits by disregarding laws around conservation, vessel safety, pollution, and, importantly, labor rights. Unfortunately, these abuses often go undisclosed and unaddressed due to the dispersed nature of the workforce, gaps in enforcement, inconsistent legal frameworks in transnational fishing, workers' isolation at sea, language barriers, and workers' lack of collective power and voice.

THE SOLUTIONS

PARTNERSHIPS AND ENGAGEMENT

As a recognized leader at the intersection of labor and fishing, ILAB uses knowledge, skills, engagement, and other available tools to combat abusive labor practices and encourages the promotion of labor rights and good jobs that benefit workers, ethical businesses, and governments. We know that to address challenges as complex as those found in fishing, governments, the private sector, civil society, workers' organizations, and multilateral organizations must collaborate. Workers must be empowered to raise their collective voice freely if we want to achieve sustainable solutions.

ILAB actively engages U.S. interagency and international partners, bringing labor rights expertise to collaborative efforts, such as the Memorandum on Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Associated Labor Abuses, the [Interagency Maritime SAFE Act](#) working group, and the [CALM-CS](#) initiative. We provide valuable assistance to interagency partners, including advising the Coast Guard on identifying forced labor aboard vessels and helping the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to include crew labor standards in Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMO), bodies that regulate fishing on the high seas. ILAB helps advance the fishing-related work of United Nations Agencies in the [Joint Working Group on IUU Fishing](#). Through bilateral commitments in U.S. free trade agreements and unilateral trade preference program criteria, ILAB also works with U.S. trade partners to address fishing abuses in their waters as no one country can solve this challenge single-handedly.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: RESEARCHING THE FISHING SUPPLY CHAIN

Since abuse in the fishing sector often happens out of sight in distant waters, it is especially critical that we understand the scope and nature of this exploitation. Through research into global seafood supply chains, ILAB has documented child labor and forced labor and associated abuses in fishing. As of September 2022, ILAB's [List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor](#) has documented child labor or forced labor in the production of fish, dried fish, shellfish, and shrimp in 20 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, China, El Salvador, Ghana, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, Vietnam, and Yemen. ILAB's annual [Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor](#) report also provides information on the global scope and nature of child labor, including in the seafood sector. It is likely these abuses are even more prevalent than current reporting suggests given the remote nature of this work and gaps in oversight and due diligence. In addition to highlighting where forced labor and child labor occur, ILAB reporting, alongside tools like [ILAB's Comply Chain](#), is a valuable resource for companies carrying out risk assessments and engaging in due diligence on labor rights in their supply chains,

WORKER-CENTERED PROGRAMMING AND POLICY

As a leading advocate for workers' rights and good jobs, ILAB engages countries and funds projects that promote ethical recruitment and support the development of policies, programs, and systems that sustainably and holistically address labor violations, promote workers' rights, and eliminate forced and child labor in the seafood supply chain. We put fishery workers at the core of these solutions.

Our current portfolio includes the Addressing Labor Exploitation in Fishing in ASEAN ([ALFA](#)) project that will strengthen the capacity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to address forced labor and abusive working conditions in the region. As part of our Measurement, Awareness Raising and Policy Engagement ([MAP 16](#)) project, ILAB supports the ILO to conduct groundbreaking research to identify forced labor indicators in the distant water fishing industry and develop a handbook to help identify fishers at risk before, during, and after their employment.

ILAB's Fostering Accountability in Recruitment for Fishery Workers ([FAIR Fish](#)) project works with small and medium size seafood-processing companies and recruitment agencies in Thailand to develop and implement a responsible recruitment model. A cost-benefit analysis of the companies that implemented the model showed promising results – ethical recruitment was good for business. Our [Decent Work in Fishing](#) project focuses on countering illegal fishing in Ecuador and Peru and improving working conditions for vulnerable populations in coastal communities engaged in artisanal fishing. Empowering workers, including through freedom of association, is fundamental to this fight.

ENFORCEMENT TOOLS

Key to addressing labor abuse in fishing is ensuring governments have the tools, knowledge, and capacity to enforce relevant laws. ILAB works with its partners on new and creative ways to advance workers' rights through the leverage of enforcement. U.S. free trade agreements and unilateral preference programs require country partners to adhere to labor rights criteria in law and practice in order to benefit from U.S. market access. ILAB played a key role in the development of the first [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) in December 2022 for labor abuse in the fishing sector. ILAB also plays a key role in providing research and data that Customs and Border Protection uses to inform its Withhold and Release Orders, which keep import goods made with forced labor out of the United States. We stand ready with our expertise and tools to work with partners committed to making change for workers in the seafood sector.