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Submission of Victor Norman To the Ministerial Inquiry into Foreign Charter Vessels

For more information contact:
Victor Norman,

I support the submission of the Service and Food Workers Union Ngā Ringa Tota (SFWU). Below is my personal submission. I wish to appear before the Ministerial Inquiry when it hears personal submissions in Nelson.

I am a SFWU delegate at Sealord's Nelson processing factory. In this role I speak on behalf of approximately 250 union members currently at my workplace. However this has been as high as 700 in the last 10 years.

I also speak on behalf of 2,000 SFWU members employed in the seafood industry across New Zealand.

My primary concern is that the Inquiry acknowledges that the issues in the industry go much further than the disgraceful exploitation of foreign workers. My concern is to ensure that the review is not narrowly confined to issues of foreign workers on FCVs but that it genuinely investigates the impact of restructuring and changes in the industry on the land-based workforce and recommends actions to bring jobs back for New Zealand workers in seafood processing.

I have been working in the seafood industry for 17 years. During that time I have seen many changes in the industry. I have also become increasingly concerned at the changes and the impact on the workforce.

I am currently employed by Sealord in their Nelson factory as a cleaner on the nightshift. Prior to working here I was employed by Sealord in Dunedin.

The changes in the industry have not occurred rapidly. I have witnessed these changes over the past 10 years as they have devastated our industry.

In 2001 delegates at our Dunedin factory were informed that Sealords was sending 10% of their quota, fished in our waters, offshore for processing.

In October 2002 our union held a seafood conference. One of the main guests at the conference was a board member of Sealords. When asked by people at the conference if Sealords was sending fish to China to be processed his reply was an emphatic “no”.

It was in Dunedin that I, and my workmates, experienced the heartache of restructuring. This began in 2004 with the closing down of the wet-fish nightshift, which caused the loss of 90 jobs at the Dunedin plant.

This was followed in 2005 by the full-scale restructure of the dayshift, with a loss of 160 jobs. In 2006, there was third and final restructure and full closure of the site, resulting in the loss of a further 80 jobs.

This closure took place not withstanding a promise to the workforce that, if a certain level of profit was achieved, the factory would remain open.

We achieved this level of profit, however the company closed down the Dunedin operation anyway.

I was relocated to Sealords’ Nelson factory wet fish operation. In Nelson we were faced with further upheaval and uncertainty. After two years of having been in Nelson, Sealords went through another closedown – this time the Nelson wet fish night shift. This resulted in the loss of 160 jobs across the Nelson business.

The impact of these restructurings has been traumatic on individual workers and also on their families and communities. Throughout these restructurings and the closing of the Dunedin site, we, the workforce, have increasingly witnessed fish that was processed on land being allocated to foreign processing facilities.

These vessels are currently fishing in the NZEEZ. Now up to 85% of fish is sent to be processed around the world. This has caused the loss of countless hundreds of jobs for New Zealanders in the seafood industry.

It is extremely worrying for New Zealand workers in the industry and worrying for all New Zealanders as this once very important industry bleeds jobs and job opportunities.

Today workers in our industry are constantly being threatened to meet company demands to work for less or face losing their jobs to cheaper overseas labour who added value process the product off shore. This has left seafood workers insecure in their employment .

In addition workers are in competition with foreign labour being paid significantly less than the minimum wage and as a consequence are undermining what has traditionally been skilled work in New Zealand.

The message we get from employers today is that if we don't give the company what they want, they're going to close the place down and go overseas.

Thousands of New Zealanders have lost jobs in the industry in the past 10 years and many more are now working for far less than they previously received.

This enquiry must investigate the causes and the lost opportunity for future employment.

I wish to appear before the Inquiry to elaborate on and answer questions on my submission.