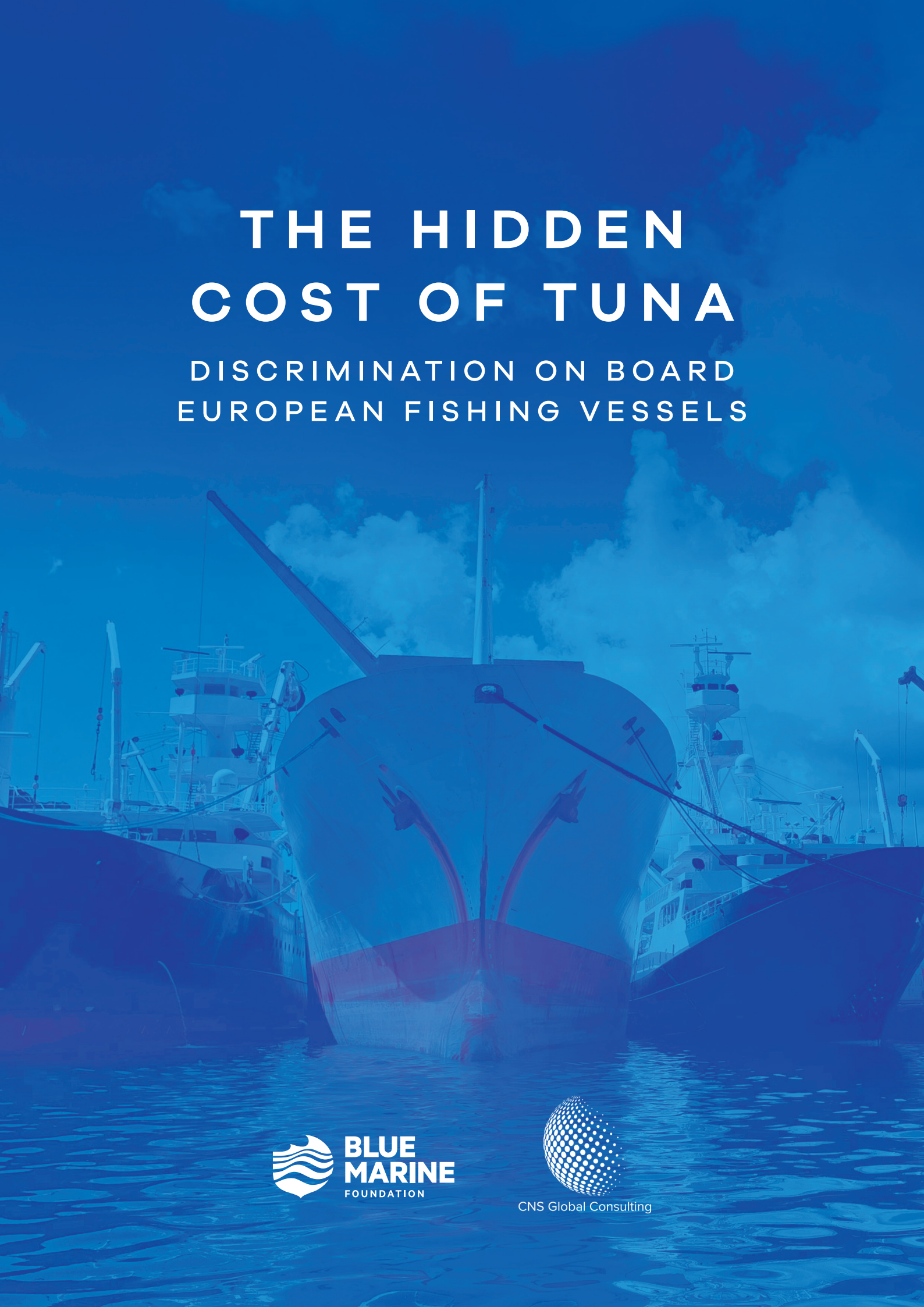
THE HIDDEN COST OF TUNA

DISCRIMINATION ON BOARD EUROPEAN FISHING VESSELS



BLUE MARINE FOUNDATION

CNS Global Consulting

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2023, the European tuna fishing fleet's carefully maintained façade of ethical behaviour and social responsibility slipped when 2,000 West African crew members went on strike to protest poor pay and exploitation on board European tuna fishing vessels. The strike generated significant coverage and prompted Blue Marine Foundation to collaborate with CNS Consulting to look into the claims being made against the European purse seine industry.

This report presents a detailed investigation into the discrimination and poor working conditions endured by many Ivorian and Senegalese crew members working on board European-owned tuna purse seine vessels operating in the Indian Ocean. Section One documents first-hand accounts of the discriminatory treatment faced by crew members both on board and on shore. These issues were experienced to varying degrees on different vessels and ranged from insufficient medical care, excessive working hours and inadequate rest to unfair employment terms, delayed or withheld payments and a troubling pattern of racism and unequal treatment.

An analysis of crew members' employment terms in Section Two reveals further issues including backdated contracts, incorrect minimum wage information and references to obsolete agreements. Payslips were often written in multiple languages, were overly complex and contained opaque calculations and unexplained deductions, making it difficult for crew members to understand whether they were paid what they were owed.

An independent investigation into the ultimate beneficial ownership of the vessels confirms that a handful of fishing companies control the European distant-water purse seine fleet operating in the Indian Ocean. The significant profits generated by several of these companies, not to mention the almost €60 million in shareholder dividends that they paid out over the past five years, make their continued refusal to adopt the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) minimum base salary for their West African crew members all the more unjustifiable.

Several crew members reportedly faced retaliation, including dismissal and intimidation, following previous strike action, fuelling fears of further repercussions if demands for fair wages continue. Despite this, syndicates and crew members expressed a shared aspiration for significant improvements in working and living conditions that align with internationally recognised labour standards, as described in Section Three.

Crew members' priorities for change include:

1. Guaranteeing the ILO minimum monthly wage as a base salary, as well as fair catch compensation.
2. Timely, regular salary payments with free, accessible means to send money home.
3. Compliance with ILO standards on working hours, rest periods, and overtime pay.
4. Transparent and accurate social security, health, and retirement contributions.
5. The provision of sufficient, nutritious food and potable water that respects cultural and religious needs.
6. Appropriate medical equipment and supplies on board and timely access to medical treatment on shore.
7. Reasonable and equitable access to communication facilities such as Wi-Fi.
8. Eradication of racism, abuse, and discrimination on board.

This report underscores the stark contradiction between the substantial profits accrued by several European fishing companies and the ongoing exploitation of West African crew members who work gruelling hours to supply the UK market with canned tuna. Addressing these issues will require coordinated action by vessel owners, national governments and international organisations to enforce and improve labour standards and ensure a fair, safe, and dignified working environment for all crew members working on board European tuna fishing vessels.

"Don't talk about sorrows if you've never had to leave your family for the immensity of the sea. Don't talk about hard work if you're not a fisher who works 20 years without a house because he works more than he charges."

INTRODUCTION

The global demand for canned tuna continues to grow, and nowhere is this more evident than in Europe where 37% of the world's canned tuna is consumed[1] and where tuna is the number one most eaten fish[2]. Horrendous instances of forced labour and abuse on board Chinese fishing vessels have received significant attention in recent years[3]. However, no thorough account exists of the conditions for crew living and working on board the European tuna fishing vessels that supply UK and EU retailers with the tuna that lines their shelves.

Blue Marine's attention was drawn to this issue following a series of strikes undertaken by West African crew in 2022 and 2023. In June 2023, approximately 2,000 Ivorian and Senegalese crew members went on strike to protest poor pay and intolerable working conditions. The strikes took place in Côte d'Ivoire and in Senegal, as well as on board vessels that were at sea at the time in the Indian and Atlantic oceans. During the strike, it was reported that some crew members were detained by Seychellois authorities[4], that internet was cut on board to limit interactions, and that fines were handed out to crew members who participated in the strike[5].

Among other priorities, striking crew were demanding to be paid the minimum base salary for seafarers set out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) – the UN agency that sets global standards for working conditions. The strike culminated in an agreement to pay crew members a minimum monthly basic wage of 250,000 West African CFA franc (FCFA) (≈US$414) – still far below the ILO minimum – for a period of six months while negotiations continued. However, this "temporary" agreement is still in place almost two years later thanks to a clause that allowed it to be automatically renewed. As Section Two of this report will show, for the key fishing companies involved, the combined average turnover for the last two years for which financial information was available was almost €460 million.

Below: Striking West African crew members on board a European vessel. Photograph courtesy of Ibra Diop.

While some European tuna purse seine vessels – so called because of the giant circular net they deploy and cinch in around whole schools of fish – operate in the Atlantic and, to a lesser extent, the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean is by far the most important region for European tuna fishing, and much of this tuna finds its way onto UK shelves. For the past decade, European-owned purse seine vessels have caught an average of more than 350,000 tonnes of tropical tuna per year in the Indian Ocean alone[6].

For this reason, and to test the commonly held assumption that the treatment of crew on board these highly sophisticated vessels is generally good, we focused on conditions for crew on board tuna purse seine fishing vessels owned by European companies operating in the Indian Ocean.

While many of the senior positions on these vessels are held by Europeans, a large proportion of the vessels' crew are often men from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Representatives from Blue Marine and CNS Consulting spent time in both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, meeting with crew members and the syndicates that represent them. In both countries, workshops were undertaken with upwards of 30 individuals at a time. Breakout sessions with smaller groups were also organised, as were follow-up interviews with willing crew members in various locations in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

After hearing the crew members' accounts, it became clear that a thorough investigation into the fishing companies' finances would be necessary. Blue Marine commissioned an independent forensic firm to undertake this work, in addition to a detailed mapping of the chains of ownership of a list of European tuna purse seine and supply vessels operating in the Indian Ocean.

This investigation proved that the ultimate beneficial ownership of most of the Indian Ocean purse seine fleet lies with a handful of companies, the combined earnings of which totalled more than €23 million for the most recent financial period.

Section One of this report begins by exploring some of the issues faced by crew on board European purse seine vessels operating in the Indian Ocean. These issues were experienced to varying degrees across purse seine vessels and ranged from discrimination in food and healthcare provision to excessive overtime, threats and abuse. This is followed by an analysis of crew members' contracts and payslips in Section Two, as well as an analysis of many of the fishing companies' finances. The comparison highlights the contrast between the low earnings of West African crew and the profitability of many of the European fishing companies that own the vessels on which they work. Section Three concludes by emphasising eight urgent priorities for change that must be adopted by fishing companies to ensure they are adhering to standards set by the ILO and to the needs of the crew members upon which their businesses depend.

SECTION ONE
DISCRIMINATION ON BOARD EUROPEAN PURSE SEINE VESSELS

Life for West African crew on board distant-water tuna purse seine vessels can involve many months away from their families, made up of weeks spent at sea working long shifts, often involving harsh conditions, extremely physically demanding work and very little rest. This is exacerbated by issues around basic necessities such as food, water and healthcare, as well as by the fact that crew members are generally not paid electronically and are therefore unable to send money home to support their families while at sea.

Section One of this report reveals the discrimination experienced in varying degrees by crew members from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire working on European tuna fishing vessels. Group sessions and interviews conducted in both countries, as well as in the Seychelles where many of the vessels operate from, uncovered widespread inequalities on board. These disparities reflect deeper issues of economic injustice which severely impact the daily lives and wellbeing of African seafarers, as well as those of the families that wait for them at home.

Beyond the conditions on board, crew members also described ongoing long-term challenges ranging from unfair dismissals and exploitative recruitment agencies who withhold payment, to a lack of social security and a fear of being replaced by crew from other African countries who will work for less money. While Section Two will go on to highlight how the fishing companies concerned paid dividends totalling almost €60 million to their shareholders in the past five years, Section One examines in detail the West African crew members' first-hand accounts of their battle to be paid a living wage and how they have repeatedly voiced their demands for fair treatment and respect.

1.1 Discrimination in medical care

Crew members in both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire were asked whether they had access to adequate medical care during their stay on board. More than 60% of the 62 crew members who answered the question said "No". In the follow-up interviews undertaken with small groups and individuals, we heard firsthand accounts of African crew being given medication that had expired. Some said that, while before the strike they were able to go to the captain for medical help, the captain now tells them to cut off the offending body part and it will no longer hurt.

"We are not well taken care of onboard. There are colleagues who died in front of us due to medical issues. The life of the sailor is not easy. May God help us."

A common theme among the West African crew was the promise of letters from the captain which would afford them to access medical care when they arrive back in Senegal or Côte d'Ivoire, following an injury or illness during their time on board the vessel. It was explained that these letters are meant to be sent by the captain to the local employment agency in the crew member's home country but that, upon arrival home, often either no letter arrived, or the crew member had to fight to access it.

During in-depth interviews in both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, several accounts were shared of severe injuries to crew, along with varying degrees of inaction from vessel owners and agencies. We met one crew member who described an injury he had sustained to his lower back which left him unable to work for several months. Another crew member described how heavy tuna had fallen on him, leaving him injured. He explained that all older crew members have a lasting injury of some kind. Another crew member described how he had fallen from a height while on board, hurting his back. He explained that, after travelling home, there was no medical letter from the captain waiting for him and that, when he finally went to the hospital, he found that he had in fact broken his back.

Another crew member showed us x-rays of his leg which was severely injured while he was on board a European purse seine vessel. He claimed that, after injuring his leg, he was told that if he did not get back to work, he would be fired. When he was taken to port by another vessel and finally received medical attention, he claimed that the doctor scolded him, saying that if he had waited a few more days, he would have lost his leg.

Several crew members with whom in-depth interviews were conducted described how, when a black person is sick or injured, the vessel continues to fish but, when a white person is sick or injured, the vessel returns to port quickly so that they can receive medical attention. One individual explained that black people have to insist time and time again to get medical attention but, for a white person, the whole world is moved to help them.

In a group session, one group complained that "in case of an accident or illness at sea, the African sailor is left at the harbour without any medical help nor transport towards a hospital, unlike the European." More than once, we heard stories of African crew members who failed to receive adequate medical care on board European tuna fishing vessels and who subsequently died. One story involved a very sick crew member from Ghana working on board a vessel operating in the Atlantic who needed to be taken back to port. However, it was reported that on the way back, the vessel encountered a school of yellowfin tuna and stopped to fish it, with the crew member passing away before they reached port.

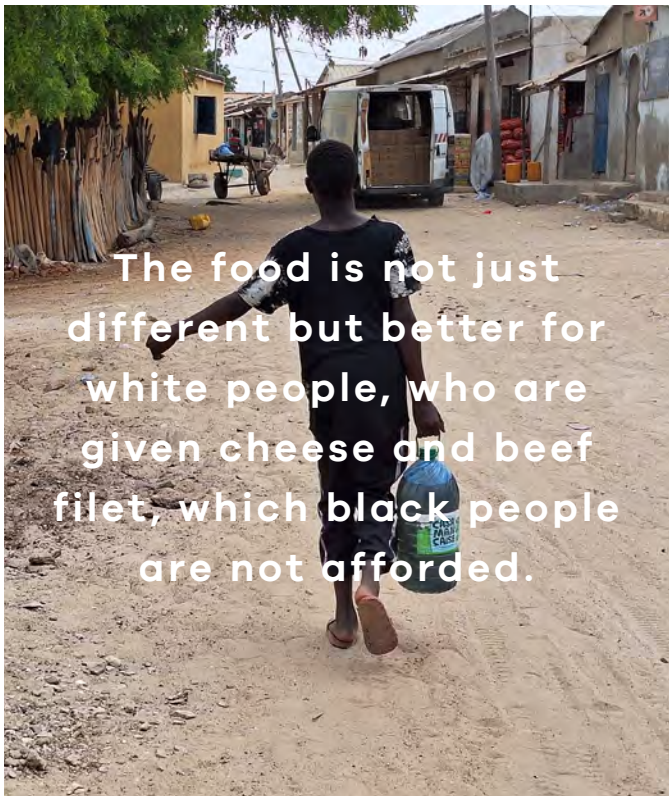
1.2 Discrimination in food and water

Crew members were asked the question "Did you receive sufficient healthy food and drinking water on board?". More than half of the 62 individuals who responded said "no". A common complaint among the West African crew members was that they have to drink water from "the tank" – described as desalinated seawater also used for washing and cleaning – whereas European crew drink bottled mineral water. However, it was made clear that not all vessels had this policy and that some provided bottled water to all. Those not lucky enough to work on board those vessels described the desalinated tank water as brackish and devoid of nutrients and minerals, and explained that, because of this, it does not provide proper hydration. We also heard an account of crew members becoming sick after drinking the desalinated water.

One crew member recounted an instance where the desalinator broke, resulting in a water shortage. He described how, after bringing the tuna on board, the crew were covered in blood from the fish, but there was no water available for washing or showering. He described how two crew members developed rashes all over their body as a result and that, after raising the issue, the patrón (who is in charge) commented that he would give them water and that, if they wanted to use that water to clean themselves, then they would probably have to die, as they would have none to drink. The same crew member described how on one of the vessels they are required to take a bottle of water with them in the morning as, from 9am until late in the day, they are not able to access any additional water. If they forget to bring their bottle or if they run out, they either have to go without water or rely on their fellow crew members to share theirs.

It was also suggested by multiple crew members that, on board some European purse seine vessels, white people and black people eat at separate tables and eat different kinds of foods. One crew member in charge of preparing food on board the vessels felt that the Europeans would blame the segregation on the issues around pork, namely that the Senegalese and Ivorian crew tend not to eat pork. We asked him whether the food was merely different for the African crew, or whether it was of poorer quality. He explained that the food is not just different but better for white people, who are given cheese and beef filet, which black people are not afforded. When asked if the division was perhaps based on rank, he clarified that it is not by rank, but by race and that even white deckhands (a lower ranking position) eat at the white table on his vessel.

Similarly, one of the breakout groups in Côte d'Ivoire gave the example of tins of sardines, which black people do not have permission to consume. It was reported by one crew member that items like yoghurt and cooldrinks are carried onto the vessels by the African crew, but that they do not get to consume them. As with the medicine on board, we heard several accounts of black people being given expired food and drink, with one crew member who worked in the kitchen recounting how there is sometimes not enough food for the African crew and that their food has had to be cooked in dirty oil.



1.3 Discrimination in working hours and holidays

The theme of discrimination was just as apparent when hearing about crew members' accounts of the hours they work and the amount of time off they are afforded. Of the 62 respondents who chose to answer the question "How many hours did you usually work per day during a fishing trip?", 47% answered "13-16", with 31% answering "more than 16". In addition, 62 out of 65 who answered the question "Did you have one day off work per week, either at sea or in port?" answered "No". Finally, no respondents indicated that they had been given a single day off when asked the question "How many days of rest do you usually have per fishing trip?".

This was echoed in the follow-up interviews that were conducted, with one crew member laughing at the concept of a day off while on board one European vessel. Some felt that they were entitled to some days off during their months at sea, but that this was not permitted. While one respondent felt that certain vessels took it easier on weekends, a common theme expressed during interviews was that crew members felt they worked far longer than they were meant to and that neither overtime nor working hours were respected.

In all group sessions, almost every attendee raised their hands when asked who has worked overtime without being paid for it. Five separate breakout groups cited not being paid for the long hours they work as one of their key issues. Indeed, when asked about their priorities for change, many respondents referenced the need for regulated working hours and for hours of rest to be respected. Frequent mention was made of the fact that, if a net ripped or a piece of machinery broke, or indeed if there were fish to be caught, there would be no rest until the issue was resolved, or the fish were in the hold. One crew member stated that, in these instances, they go all day without having time to eat – if there's fish, there's no rest.

Some crew members indicated that they wanted African crew to be afforded the same work-to-holiday ratio as European crew, namely four months on, four months off. This, one respondent said, would allow African crew to rest their bodies and live longer. While a very small number of individuals that we spoke to had managed to arrange this for themselves, the vast majority spent two months at home after each four-month fishing campaign. However, in addition to crew members being called back before their two months were over, we also heard accounts of African crew being told to stay on the vessels for longer than they are meant to, while they felt that white people's dates were generally respected. Crew members from both Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire complained that they were given very little warning in advance of having to return to sea for upwards of four months. One person stated that they sometimes receive a call in the morning to depart that afternoon, allowing very little time to prepare and showing little respect for the personal commitments and responsibilities of the crew. Another crew member likened it to the military, saying "when they call you for war, you have to go".

"You spend 12 hours a day looking through binoculars to find something to fish and at night, instead of resting, they put you on lookout duty at the bow of the boat, it looks like you are a security guard, that's not normal. The lookout is the most important crew member on a boat, if there is no lookout we are not even catching a ton of fish, so he deserves honour and sufficient rest."

1.4 Discrimination in employment terms and payment

The most prevalent issues raised by crew members in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire were those around payment. Prior to the strike, it was reported that West African crew members were being paid below the ILO minimum wage, which was US$658 per month in 2023, US$666 in 2024 and is currently US$673[7]. This was confirmed by some of the older crew contracts from 2016-2019, several of which listed a base salary of between 69,000 FCFA and 86,000 FCFA (≈US$114-US$142) per month.

Following the strikes, a temporary agreement was reached in September 2023, whereby shipowners agreed to raise crew members' minimum monthly base salaries (ie. the guaranteed base rate, excluding bonuses) to 250,000 FCFA per month – approximately US$414 – still far below the ILO minimum. The agreement, was to be in effect for six months. However, almost two years later, the agreement is still in place and there was frustration among the syndicates that fishing companies were just rolling the agreement over instead of returning to the table to renegotiate after six months.

The notion of payment discrimination based on race was raised many times and was also cited as one of the reasons why young Senegalese men are pushed to make the risky voyage in small boats to the Spanish Canary Islands; if successful, they explained, young men are able to be hired to work on the vessels as Europeans, not Senegalese, and, thereby, to be paid more. This is supported by the findings of a recent report by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) which highlighted the increasing rate at which people are making the dangerous crossing from West Africa to Spain's Canary Islands – the most lethal migration route in the world – as a result of overfishing, rising poverty and unemployment[8]. Migration is often perceived as the only viable alternative, but the route from Senegal to the Canary Islands is plagued by shipwrecks and disappearances, and a total of 3,176 migrants lost their lives attempting the journey in 2023 alone[9]. The accounts of many of the individuals interviewed by EJF echo the statements of crew members who stated that they do not want their children to do this same work but that, the way they are currently paid, there is no future.

One Senegalese respondent claimed that they are paid by the colour of their skin – if you are black, you get paid badly – with another stating "Africans work on board while whites are paid even while at home". This latter statement refers specifically to tonnage compensation – a 'bonus' that crew members earn, depending on how much fish they catch. As explained further in Section Two, for many West African crew members, this tonnage bonus makes up the majority of their pay. However, not only does this mean that catching less fish

results in less money being earned (regardless of hours worked), but it was also expressed by multiple groups from both countries that European crew earn a share of the tonnage caught even when they are on holiday and not on the vessel. African crew are, in general, only paid for the fish caught while they are on board.

While we heard some exceptions to this rule, this trend would of course result in far higher wages for those who receive the bonus year-round, and explains the frustration felt by the Ivorian and Senegalese groups who feel that they are paid less for working as hard, if not harder, than European crew members. One respondent stated: "As a cook, I am not paid like a white cook, yet I do the same work as him. He benefits from 4 months of fishing while being at home. I benefit from the fishing I do on board, on leave, nothing". There is also suspicion and uncertainty around the real quantity of fish caught. Crew members frequently recounted how the payslip given to them by the captain when they disembark and the amount they are eventually paid when they return to their home country do not match.

In one of the group sessions, it was stated that the West African crew sacrificed themselves but never saw the fruits of their sacrifice. One crew member who had been working on board a vessel for over 20 years described how he and his fellow crew members still could not afford a house or many of the most basic necessities, despite their many years of service. He described how the fishing company he works for does not pay him well, even though he works hard and extremely long hours, and that his salary is not adjusted to meet inflation. Another crew member explained that, between the high cost of living and their low salaries, they are not living but merely surviving. This confirms the statement reported by Mongabay in its 2023 coverage of the crew's strike: "We don't work to buy a car or build a house. We work just to eat"[10].

"The white sailor even when on leave receives the payment for his tonnage but the African seafarer can stay (4 months + 2 months) without payment."

1.5 Discrimination in treatment on board

When asked whether the work carried out on the ship was as promised before they started, 62% of respondents answered "no". This was echoed by others in follow-up interviews where we heard that crew members are required to undertake tasks like offloading fish and painting the vessel, despite these not being in their contracts. One breakout group stated that, if they refuse, they risk punishment and having their salaries cut.

One crew member described how he oversees some white deckhands who are part of his team but that, despite being their chief, the white deckhands earn more money than him. Another explained that he had experienced discrimination as a black crew member from white officers, and that he found himself in a situation whereby he had to train a new white crew member who then became his boss, with a higher salary. The same crew member quoted a representative from one fishing company as allegedly having said, for black people, you do not have to follow what is written in the contract and that, for black people, there are no rules for negotiation. While this statement cannot be confirmed, the individual named by the crew member was confirmed to be a member of the fishing company's management team.

Compounding this issue of poor payment is the fact that crew members are not, for the most part, paid by bank transfer and are instead paid in cash or by cheque. It was suggested that, while some vessels do pay their crew by bank transfer, others refuse. This prevents crew members from being able to send money home to their families during their many months at sea. For families already struggling to make ends meet, only being paid every six months is highly problematic, with an inability to pay school fees or to pay for medical care for their family while at sea given as examples of the consequences.

We also heard accounts of "unlimited racism" on board the vessels, ranging from disturbing descriptions of monkey impressions on board some vessels to stories about European birthdays being respected and celebrated, while African birthdays are not. One crew member described in detail an instance where the seas were rough and there was a lot of wind, but the captain still ordered them to take out the net. The crew member suggested that they slow down so as not to endanger the people working, to which the captain responded over the loudspeaker that there are no people here. The crewmember explained: If he says there are no people, that means we are nothing.

More than 60% of respondents stated that they did not feel comfortable raising concerns about their working conditions with their employer or authorities. Of the 42 crew members in Senegal and Cote who d'Ivoire answered "yes" to the question "Have you ever asked for help or support for work-related problems?", only ten indicated that the problem had been resolved, meaning that the vast majority of those who had reached out for assistance did not have their issues resolved.

Of the 60 crew members who chose to indicate whether they had experienced intimidation or threats, two-thirds said yes, and 80% answered yes to whether they had experienced discrimination. Some direct quotes ranged from "lack of consideration and lack of respect between the sailor and the white boss" and "no impartiality in the event of a dispute with a white person" to "despite hard work, repetitive verbal violence" and simply "racism". Indeed, of the 59 people who answered the question of whether they had experienced verbal abuse, 69% said yes. One respondent explained that, if something goes wrong, it's always a black person's fault and that, when concerns are raised, they are told to shut up and continue working. Other crew members also reported that they had been threatened with being fired and had experienced verbal abuse from the captain. One crew member reported that his seaman's book had been withheld as a punishment for him speaking up about conditions on board, meaning that he was unable to leave the vessel to go to port.

"Since the Africans' salaries have been increased, they are experiencing an indescribable ordeal (bad nutrition and a witch hunt)."

1.6 Discrimination in treatment on land

In addition to not being paid enough, we heard multiple accounts of crew members having to fight to receive what they were owed once back in their home countries. When asked "Were you paid regularly and on time?", more than half of respondents answered "Never". This grievance was raised time and time again by crew members from both countries: it was cited as a problem by six different breakout groups and again in seven additional in-depth interviews. We heard accounts of crew members spending four months at sea before returning home and having to wait an additional two to three months for payment. For many, this means that they only receive their salaries shortly before returning to sea, with one crew member describing having received payment for his many months at sea on the Thursday and being called to return on the Sunday.

Crew members and syndicates explained that payment was something that had to be repeatedly requested and fought for. While there was a clear agreement on the issue of delayed payments, opinions were divided on who was to blame. A fair amount of blame for delayed payments was levelled at the local recruitment agencies. We were sent a video of crew members in Côte d'Ivoire gathering at the offices of one of the main agencies, demanding to be paid what was owed to them. The agencies were described as "mafia" by one respondent who, along with another breakout group, claimed that the agencies collude with the vessel owners to give the crew less money. It was also suggested that the agencies are paid a lump sum by the fishing companies at the start of the year to cover crew members' wages and that agencies invest this money, making them reluctant to pay out to crew and reduce the returns they receive from their investment, although this was not confirmed.

"I'd like to make it clear that [manning] agencies steal from us all the time. I was made redundant for asking for my salary, which was late in arriving when my leave was coming to an end, and when I received my pay it turned out that I had been wrongfully deducted. I was made redundant without any rights."

Another common complaint regarding the agencies was their failure to pay the crew members' pension and social security contributions. In Côte d'Ivoire, the national social security fund is CNPS (La Caisse nationale de prévoyance sociale), in Senegal retirement payments are made to IPRES (Institut de Prévoyance de Retraite du Sénégal) – a points-based pension system based on salary and the length of time during the year that the person contributed to the system[11]. When asked to list their concerns, one individual wrote "non-payment of social security contributions", with another answering that "the payments of the IPRES not respected". During group meetings, several breakout groups also referenced this issue.

One individual showed us the records of his IPRES contributions. There were large, unexplained gaps and he claimed that the agency only paid his social security contributions for three out of the last four years, and that four years' worth of payments were missing over the course of his career. He claimed that the money was taken from him but not paid into his IPRES fund by his agency. Another crew member described how he was injured while on board one of the vessels in the Indian Ocean and was unable to work for several months as a result. He recounted that, during this time, he realised that social insurance payments had not been made, leaving him without financial support. While some clearly felt the agencies were to blame, others pointed out that, not only are the European fishing companies ultimately responsible, but they have been told directly by the crew that this was happening and appear to have taken no action to remedy the situation.

Questions around blame and responsibility were also raised when it came to crew members' contracts not being renewed. Several crew members stated that, despite some working for the same fishing company for many years (one for more than two decades), they had either simply not been called back to the vessel after their time at home, or they had been given a paper

Above: International Labour Day demonstration in Senegal, May 2025. Photograph courtesy of Ibra Diop.

telling them that they were fired. One person felt that the agencies had taken bribes from other crew members to take them over him. Several others felt they had been let go by the fishing companies because they participated in the strike. One individual described how, despite working for the same company for decades, his captain filed a report saying that he did not want to work because he told the captain that he would not fish while his comrades were on strike. One of the syndicates told us that some striking crew were removed from vessels, not paid for the months that they had worked, and then not rehired by the fishing companies.

Blue Marine and CNS spent several hours listening to the accounts of two Senegalese crew members, one currently employed and one who had been fired. During this meeting, we heard about threats and intimidation that has been levelled against those striking on the vessels, how protesting crew were sent home and replaced by crew from other countries who were less experienced and less aware of their rights, and how the captain told the remaining crew that they would be fired too if they kept striking. We were shown an email sent by a representative of one European fishing company to the local agency in Senegal, permanently discharging several crew members for "poor performance". One of the named crew members told us he had worked for the company for more than 20 years before receiving this email from the agency telling him he was fired.

At the same meeting, we were told that crew members were called by one of the fishing companies and told that they could come aboard only if they did not join the protest. Most concerningly, we heard that the companies had exacted 'revenge' upon the West African crew for striking. This included Wi-Fi being cut, bonuses being removed or reduced, and the door to the captain being closed to them. Indeed, we heard many times that the increase to the base salaries (to an amount still far below the ILO minimum) achieved through the strike had come at a significant cost – literally, in the form of firings and reductions to bonuses, and figuratively in the form of reduced access to the captain and "excessive repression since the salary protocol", as one crew member described it.

SECTION TWO
PAYSLIPS AND PROFITABILITY

To help contextualise the amounts paid to African crew members and to prove the European beneficial ownership of the vessels, Blue Marine commissioned an independent forensic firm to undertake a detailed investigation of several of the European fishing companies' ownership structures and finances.

Of the companies for which financial analysis was undertaken, the combined average turnover for the last two years for which financial information was available was almost €460 million[12]. The combined earnings of these companies for the most recent financial period analysed was over €23 million[13]. Several of the identified companies paid dividends to their shareholders in the past five years and these totalled almost €60 million.

The combined turnover of the companies analysed was more than €420 million in 2023. The combined net assets of the companies was in excess of €300 million and the companies paid a range of dividends over the past five years of between €5 million and €22 million.

In stark contrast, West African crew members working on board these vessels are still fighting to be given the ILO minimum as their base salary. In addition to the interviews conducted with over 70 crew members in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire described in Section One, Blue Marine and CNS were also able to analyse the contracts and payslips of many West African crew members working on board European tuna purse seiners operating in the Indian Ocean. While there is no common standard of employment across the industry, some recurring hiring, contractual and payment practices were identified.

Crew members are either hired directly by the fishing companies or through local recruitment agencies in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire who then typically handle their payments. They generally

receive an advance of 300,000 FCFA (≈US$490) before boarding but then do not receive any further payment during their time on board (referred to in this section as a 'campaign'), except for small advances for phone costs or tobacco. Campaigns usually last four months, although some can be significantly longer.

A crew member usually receives a payslip from the captain when leaving the vessel, stating the number of days he spent on board, the tonnage of fish caught, advances made and net pay to be received. Another payslip is then often issued by the agency upon the crew member's return to their home country, and it is on this document that their payment is based. We heard numerous accounts of discrepancies existing between the first and second payslips – an issue that was confirmed by our review. In addition, individual payslips were often in French, Spanish and English, adding to the confusing nature of what should be a relatively straightforward document. This is exacerbated by the fact that many crew members do not read Spanish or English or, in some cases, are illiterate. Some payslips also showed amounts in multiple currencies (including XFA, EUR, SCR and USD) without providing conversion rates, making the calculations unclear.

Crew members reported that they are generally hired on the understanding that they spend four months on board and two months at home. However, their contracts did not explicitly state this. Leave pay was mentioned in contracts, but was sometimes covered by single, noncommittal clauses like "the seaman will have paid vacations", without providing any further details. Payslips issued by one company simply referenced "permiso", which typically refers to permission given for absence from work, without giving a breakdown of how it was calculated or how many days of leave the crew member had been given. One crew member indicated that he did not receive one day off work per week, either at sea or in port. The leave section of his most recent payslip was difficult to decipher,

as a two-digit number was given without any unit. As a result, it was not possible to know with certainty whether it represented a number of days, a percentage or some other value, and this prevented CNS and Blue Marine from being able to judge whether the amount paid was appropriate or not.

One payslip was spread across three pages, with deductions taken from various taxable and gross salary figures and with different net pay statements on each page. An overall net salary to be paid was missing, leaving the crew member without clarity on what he was owed. In another payslip from the same company, the hiring date was changed halfway through the document. A crew member working for the company also had medical expenses deducted from his salary, despite his contract confirming that "in the event that the illness or accident does not require the seamen to disembark, the medical expenses will be borne by the shipowner".

None of the contracts mentioned the four months on, two months off rotation. Similarly, time periods covered by contracts varied, with some issued with an indefinite end date and others just covering one campaign. Several contracts that were reviewed appear to have been backdated after syndicates and fishing companies agreed to raise crew members' monthly base salaries to 250,000 FCFA in September 2023, following the strike in June 2023. As explained in Section One, the agreement was only meant to last for six months, although the text did allow for it to be renewed automatically. During our interviews, syndicates indicated that, after that six-month period expired, salaries were meant to be further increased to the ILO minimum base salary with bonuses like catch compensation added to this, but that this had not yet happened.

After the strike, some crew members were presented with new contracts containing the 250,000 FCFA wage. Many of these were signed in 2023 and 2024 but had start dates raging from five to 15 years earlier. It is clear from other contracts that most crew members were paid far less before September 2023, with several contracts showing a monthly base wage of less than 69,000 FCFA (≈US$140). The newly supplied, backdated contracts appear to be an attempt by some fishing companies to give the false impression that wages were higher all along.

Contracts from different companies presented the ILO minimum base salaries in various misleading ways. A crucial difference between syndicates' and fishing companies' interpretation of the ILO minimum base salary centres around the issue of bonuses. While syndicates view the ILO minimum as a guaranteed base salary before any additional payments such as tonnage compensation, fishing companies appear to think that the sum of the monthly base salary and any accumulated bonuses should all add up to the ILO minimum base salary, despite it clearly being described as the "agreed minimum monthly basic wage" by the ILO[14]. When catch compensation was combined with base salaries in crew members' payslips, the monthly ILO minimum was generally reached (although this does not take into account the months spent at home between campaigns).

However, the ILO minimum wage is in place to prevent crew members' core salary being subject to good catches in an overfished and increasingly unpredictable ocean. Indeed, the crew's syndicates' interpretation of the ILO minimum wage appears to be supported by the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006) which states that "basic pay or wages means the pay, however composed, for normal hours of work; it does not include payments for overtime worked, bonuses, allowances, paid leave or any other additional remuneration"[15]. Interestingly, the EU's 2014 fisheries partnership agreement with Seychelles acknowledges this, saying: "The basic wage conditions, i.e. minimum wage before the addition of bonuses, granted to Seychelles seamen shall be set on either the basis of that provided by Seychelles legislation or the minimum standard set by the ILO[16]".

Several payslips from one company made vague references to the ILO, such as an "ILO complement" and an "ILO differential / taxable gross" without elaborating what these were or what amounts were associated with them. The applicable ILO minimum base salaries should have been US$658 for 2023 and US$666 as of 1 January 2024[17]. Neither the payslips nor contracts mentioned these amounts. Contracts from another fishing company also referred to the ILO minimum salary, indicating that accumulated earnings should either reach the ILO minimum or, if this threshold was not met, they would automatically be increased to that year's ILO minimum base salary. More than one contract noted that the ILO base salary was "US$641/month for the year 2021" despite the contracts being signed in 2022.

Similarly, another contract with a different company was signed in 2024 and referenced the correct 2024 ILO minimum monthly salary of US$666, but claimed to take effect in 2019, several years before the US$666 amount was even adopted by the ILO. The ILO minimum salary was not listed as the crew member's base salary, but was referred to in a paragraph stating that, if the crew member's total gross salary (basic monthly salary plus bonus plus other salary components) does not reach this amount of $666, this amount will be taken as the total gross salary. This addition highlights the differing interpretations of the ILO minimum salary, with crew and syndicates viewing it as the minimum monthly basic wage and fishing companies viewing it as the combined total of wages and bonuses.

The terms of the termination section of one contract were confusing and stated that the contract would be automatically extended if not "terminated". It was not clear what this referred to and it seemed the crew member was let go without termination notice, since he was simply not approached to join another campaign.

Interestingly, some payslips claimed to adhere to a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), referencing agreed minimum conditions and wages. However, communications with the ITF confirmed that the agreement that once existed had long since expired. Instead of defining the basic hours of work, the monthly overtime and overtime rate, the number of leave days and leave pay, any subsistence allowance or indeed the total wages, the documents pointed to the non-existent ITF CBA, assigning responsibility to the ITF and stating: "The ITF may vary the terms and conditions of the applicable ITF CBA from time to time. Terms and conditions as so varied shall form part of this Contract with effect from the date of the Variation in place of the Terms and Conditions current immediately preceding the Variation."

The entire ITF section appears in English in the payslip, a language that the majority of crew members interviewed did not understand. These features make it very difficult for crew members to determine their rights and wages due, opening the possibility for ship owners to shirk responsibility and underpay their employees.

SECTION THREE
CONCLUSION AND PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

Section One of this report gave an account of the poor conditions and discrimination faced by Ivorian and Senegalese crew members working on board some European-owned tuna purse seine vessels in the Indian Ocean. This discrimination ranged from crew members' treatment on board and on land to the provision of food, water and medical care, and from working hours and rest time to employment terms and payment. These findings, gathered through structured interviews with both crew and local syndicates, paint a disturbing picture of racism and inequity on board many of the world's largest industrial tuna fishing vessels operating in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Section Two of the report analysed contracts and payslips of crew members working aboard these vessels. Many of these documents were backdated, written in multiple languages, or simply too complicated or poorly written to be understood. Some featured incomprehensible deductions, referred to agreements that no longer existed or made references to the incorrect ILO minimum base salary.

An independent forensic investigation confirmed that a handful of European companies own the Indian Ocean purse seine fleet and highlighted that many of these companies are making millions of euros in profit while West African crew members are still fighting to be paid the ILO minimum base salary. An ITF representative highlighted the absurdity of the situation following the 2023 strike, saying that "it beggars belief that superprofitable companies and the government authorities, benefiting from highly advantageous fishing agreements negotiated for them by the EU commission, think it is acceptable to disregard the clear provision for the ILO seafarers' basic minimum wage[18]".

During interviews with crew and syndicates, we heard about fishing companies exacting "revenge" upon the West African crew for striking in 2023. Several groups described how the fight to get the monthly base salaries up to 250,000 FCFA had come at significant cost, especially to those who lost their jobs. Several more expressed concern over any additional retaliation that might take place if they were successful in their push to secure the ILO minimum salary, given that this would necessitate a more than 60% increase on the current 250,000 FCFA base rate.

While each crew member had their own priorities for change and conditions on board individual vessels varied, clear trends emerged, especially within group sessions, during which small breakout groups were asked to answer the question "What are the five main difficulties that you have experienced in relation to working on European vessels in the Indian Ocean?". These issues, together with the priorities put forward by those we interviewed, are listed below in no specific order. Many echo the standards set by the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007.

During interviews with crew and syndicates, we heard about fishing companies exacting "revenge" upon the West African crew for striking in 2023.

1. **Crew members should be paid the ILO minimum monthly wage.** This should be the minimum monthly basic wage set for that year, as set by the ILO, and paid as a guaranteed base rate, with catch compensation and any additional bonuses provided in addition to this core amount. Senegalese and Ivorian crew and syndicates also expressed a desire for African crew to be paid the same amount as European crew, and to be paid catch compensation during their months at home, in the way that they understand European crew are.

   "I demand that my working conditions and wages be improved and that the ILO minimum wage be paid to seafarers."

2. **Salary payments should be made promptly and at regular intervals.** In addition, crew members must be given a means to transmit their payments to their families at no cost[19] .

   "The white sailor even when on leave receives the payment for his tonnage but the African seafarer can stay (4 months + 2 months) without payment."

3. **Working hours and time off, as set by the ILO, should be respected, with overtime paid when additional hours are worked.** Fishing vessels must be safely and sufficiently manned and fishers must be given regular and sufficient periods of rest to ensure safety and health[20]. Crew members on board vessels at sea for more than three days must be provided a minimum of ten hours of rest per day and 77 hours per week[21].

   "Have never received any overtime pay and every day we work more than 12 hours."

4. **Social security, retirement and health insurance payments should be made correctly and transparently[22]**. Fishing companies must bear the ultimate responsibility for this and should ensure that no intermediary or agency prevents or interferes with the payments, jeopardising crew members' healthcare or retirement cover.

   "We notice that payments are not being made to IPRES which causes the sailor to have a lot of problems when he retires"

5. **Sufficient food and potable water must be provided for crew members**, and both must be suitable in respect of nutritional value, quality and quantity[23]. Regard must be paid to crew members' religious requirements and cultural practices in relation to food. Food and water shall be provided by the vessel owner at no cost to the crew member (unless there is a collective agreement to the contrary)[24].

"Discrimination between us blacks and whites, and whites are treated better on board than us Africans in terms of food, white cooks don't give a damn".

6. **Fishing vessels must carry appropriate medical equipment and supplies** and must be equipped for radio or satellite communication with medical services on shore[25]. All crew members have the right to medical treatment on shore and to be taken ashore in a timely manner to receive treatment for serious injury or illness[26]. To the extent that it is consistent with national law and practice, medical care while the crew member is on board or landed in a foreign port must be provided free of charge to the crew member[27].

"In case of an accident or illness at sea, the African sailor is left at the harbour without any medical help nor transport towards a hospital, unlike the European."

7. **All crew members must be given reasonable access to communication facilities** (such as satellite phones or Wi-Fi) to the extent practicable, at a reasonable cost and not exceeding the full cost to the vessel owner[28]. Wi-Fi access has been described as "one of the most impactful interventions for improving crew well-being" and facilitates real-time communication with family as well as essential services such as financial management[29].

"White people have Wi-Fi rights, Africans don't."

8. **Racism, abuse and discrimination must be abolished on board European tuna fishing vessels.**

"Discrimination in food. Discrimination in pay. Despite hard work, repetitive verbal abuse…White people get drunk and disturb us. No impartiality in the event of a dispute with a white [person]".

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