

Under a Salmon Dictatorship

Crippled by outbreaks of infectious disease, Chile's multinational-dominated salmon industry has dipped in productivity, leaving women with little protection

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Gladys, 33, expecting her fourth child, lives in the coastal city of Calbuco, in an archipelago of 15 small islands in the south of Chile. For almost ten years she has worked in various jobs in national and multinational companies that rear, process and export salmon to Japan, the United States and the European Union.

In less than two decades, the industrial monoculture of salmon, started in the 1980s by Norwegian, Spanish and Japanese multinationals, has transformed this South American country into the second-largest producer of salmon in the world, providing 37 per cent of the global supplies, behind Norway, which leads with 42 per cent. Salmon is an exotic species introduced into the waters of the southern regions of Chile.

Today, one in four farmed salmon fillets consumed worldwide comes from the cold regions where Gladys and her colleagues work for up to ten to 12 hours a day.

In 1990, the salmon industry in Chile exported 24,000 tonnes of trout and salmon, worth US\$116 mn. By 1999, exports had increased to over 200,000 tonnes, worth US\$810 mn, and by 2007, just before the outbreak of the current infectious salmon anaemia (ISA) virus disease, production rose to 665,000 tonnes, valued at US\$2,400 mn.

To reach such levels of production, salmon companies employed around 35,000 workers who came from the regions of Chiloé, Aysén and Magallanes, in addition to migrant workers from other regions of the country.

The fish-processing plants, installed mainly in Puerto Montt, employ a workforce that is around 70 per cent female, who work eight-hour shifts in the Norwegian company, Mainstream/Cermaq. Three shifts are normally operated: one from 8 am to 4 pm, the second from 4 pm until midnight, and the third, throughout the night and early morning.

Many of the women workers in Mainstream/Cermaq, in which the Norwegian State owns a 43 per cent share, are not formally educated. Says Vanesa Ojeda, a worker and union leader: "Previously, they used to have courses for women who were on long-term contracts to help them complete their education. But for the past two years these courses are no longer being provided."

In 2007, Chile's salmon industry faced its first major crisis, as a result of two decades of poor environmental and sanitary practices, triggered by the complicity of government officials, weak legislation and a lack of political will.

At the start of 2009, there was an infestation of sea lice (*Caligulus spp*), an ectoparasite found naturally, to a small degree, in native fish species. However, the high densities of salmon in the floating cages, above the maximum permitted levels, combined with the concentrations of rearing centres and the irresponsible use of chemicals, caused this parasite to proliferate, resulting in the loss of up to 30 per cent of the biomass in the salmon centres.

Added to that, in June 2009, the spread of ISA from eggs imported from Norway devastated the Atlantic salmon-rearing centres, and there was a 50 per cent fall in the overall production of the industry, triggering the layoff of almost 40 per cent of the industry's workforce.

In response to this crisis, the salmon companies, which only last year made public their enormous debts—around ten times their investment—are asking the State for new loans. They are also lobbying for a bill that will allow them to become owners in perpetuity of aquaculture concessions, provided free

MAINSTREAM TRADE UNION



Pregnant women during a break in the factory canteen of the multinational, Mainstream/Cermaq, at Calbuco, Chile

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of charge by the State, for mortgages. The companies owe Chilean and foreign banks more than US\$2,500 mn.

Prior to 2007, salmon workers earned average monthly salaries of 250,000 pesos (around US\$470). Their salaries were based on the legal minimum wage of 159,000 pesos (around US\$300). The remainder was made up from various bonuses related to production and time at work, calculated both on a collective and individual basis.

Today, however, in the middle of the ISA crisis, there is no production bonus, and salaries in the salmon industry have been halved. In Mainstream/Cermaq “the salaries are now only the legal minimum as no fish is coming in for processing”, affirms William Rebolledo, the president of the trade union. Says Vanessa Ojeda: “We always used to earn the minimum salary plus production bonuses. But now with no salmon in the plant, they are asking us to do cleaning work for not a single extra peso.”

In the first three months of 2009 alone, Mainstream/Cermaq had net earnings, before tax, of US\$25 mn, as reported by the Chief Executive Officer, Geir Isaksen. Workers fear that the current crisis is serving as an opportunity for the company to get rid of its regular, organized workforce. “No salmon is coming to Mainstream/Cermaq but we believe that it’s being taken to other processing plants, because they want to close this plant, lay off everyone, and then contract in workers who are neither organized nor have a trade union,” says Vanessa Ojeda.

These fears are not baseless. Recently, along with Gladys, 15 other pregnant workers were fired illegally from Cermaq/Mainstream. Layoffs of pregnant women are common in several salmon companies, despite labour laws that protect trade union leaders and pregnant women. To circumvent the law, several companies make women undergo pregnancy tests before hiring them. According to a study carried out by the National Labour Directorate, “in the specific case of women, some trade union leaders indicate that the companies prefer ‘young women, but not too young,’ so that their reproductive age is not incidental to their entry and exit from the labour market.”

“It’s disgusting that a fillet of salmon should be worth more than a pregnant woman”, says William Rebolledo. “All these women have scarce means. Most of them are single mothers with no social protection. Some have told us that they

have been victims of sexual harassment, but have chosen not to complain for fear of being dismissed and left jobless”, he adds.

The workers brought the layoffs to the attention of the Labour Ministry’s Inspectorate of Work and, on 13 May 2009, inspection officials visiting Mainstream/Cermaq found that a “legal separation of functions” applied to pregnant workers. For this, the salmon company was fined 7.7 mn pesos (US\$13,110). An additional fine of 2.2 mn pesos (US\$4,120) was imposed for “not providing work as contracted”.

The company reacted by taking the 15 pregnant salmon workers to court in an attempt to lay them off legally, demanding, in addition, withholding of salaries for the duration of the case. However it lost the legal battle in the Calbuco Tribunal. It then appealed to the Puerto Montt Appeals Court, which reviewed two cases but ruled in favour of the workers.

Unable to lay off the pregnant workers, the company increased harassment levels. Gladys says that on various occasions, but especially in the last month, “all the pregnant women at Mainstream/Cermaq were sent to work in the packing section, where temperatures are below freezing.”

“Now that there was no production, the bosses were sending the pregnant women, whom they had not been able to lay off, to the toilets section to wash the equipment with chlorine”, recounts Vanessa Ojeda. The pregnant women were provided neither gloves nor masks. Many refused but some women, cowed down by an abusive middle management, worked without any protection.

Union leaders allege that the conditions of work have caused an increase in spontaneous abortions. The acclaimed documentary on intensive salmon-farming in Chile, “Ovas de Oro” (Golden Eggs), records the case of a woman worker who suffered an abortion from having to do heavy work in below-freezing temperatures.

Another woman worker in Mainstream/Cermaq, Claudia, had a spontaneous abortion when she was hit by heavy salmon being offloaded onto a table. “At the end of December 2007, I was working in the classified area where salmon of between 4 and 9 kg were being dumped on a large table. These salmon rebounded and several of them hit me in the belly. I felt a lot of pain and had to go home”, she recounted. Throughout January 2008 Claudia had symptoms of miscarriage, suffering

such losses of blood during night shifts that she had to retire from work. The abortion took place in early February at the regional hospital at Puerto Montt; Claudia received blood transfusions.

Puerto Montt's women salmon workers are today united in calling for an end to anti-union practices, double standards, low salaries, heavy workloads, as well as the systematic violation of labour, environmental and sanitary laws. ❏