

# The Salmon Demon

The growing global opposition to destructive salmon farming has found vocal expression in Chile and Argentina, highlighting issues related to labour and working conditions

The industrial salmonid monoculture in Chile has a history of more than three decades of productive and territorial expansion in the country's waters, which has transformed the South American country into the world's second-largest producer of Atlantic salmon, accounting for 30 per cent of global supply. Thirty-four thousand people work in salmon cultivation farms and processing plants, and in associated activities, such as terrestrial and sea cargo.

Currently, 40 per cent of workers in the salmon industry work through various subcontractors. Temporary and precarious jobs, in the form of fixed-term jobs, prevail. This asymmetric contractual relationship allows the client salmon companies to reduce costs, while disclaiming responsibilities in instances of environmental, health and labour crises. For their part, subcontractors maximize their profits by taking advantage of the low bargaining capacity of workers, given the high unemployment rates.

This situation leaves workers without social protection, and unable to unionize and participate in negotiations to defend their rights and to improve their living and working conditions. This expression of 'savage capitalism' contrasts with that existing in Norway, the world's leading salmon producer, where the State recognizes the democratic and social rights of workers.

## A global record for labour mortality

The working conditions in this export industry are so precarious that more than 60 salmon workers' deaths were registered between 2013 and 2021. The industry registered an accident rate of 4.12 per cent in 2019, higher than in

Chilean agriculture and fishing (3.9 per cent) and even higher than in the construction sector (4 per cent). The most affected are divers and workers in maritime and land transport. In the case of divers, the main causes of accidents are decompression sickness and deaths by suffocation when they get entangled in the nets of the salmon pens. Associated diseases include otic barotrauma (inflammation in the ears), dysbaric osteonecrosis (damage to the bones caused by nitrogen embolism) and acute sinusitis. In the case of the ship workers, the causes were falls into the sea, collisions with other—mainly artisanal fishing—vessels and accidents on deck.

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However, the number of accidents in the Chilean salmon industry must be compared with the rate of accidents in the industry at the global level. Approximately 6,000 divers work in approximately 3,500 raft cages distributed over almost 2,000 km of the Chilean coastline, mainly in Patagonia in the south. Ninety per cent of these workers have only a basic diving licence. Most of these divers are artisanal fishers who work in salmon farms during the closed season in the fishery. Recruiting these fishers informally is cheaper for the companies than hiring professional industrial divers. Many of them do not have the necessary training and the appropriate implements to work at depths up to 30 m.

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A salmon farm in the Reloncaví estuary in Chile's Los Lagos region. The working conditions in the industry are so precarious that more than 60 workers' deaths were registered between 2013 and 2021.

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These underwater workers perform rapid cycles of successive daily dives without the vital decompression and rest time—a practice known as “yo-yo diving”. They are not provided any health insurance by their employers. In the first three months of 2021 alone, three divers died in the Aysén region.

Added to this is the fact that Chilean salmon farming has the lowest wages and the longest working hours in this industry globally. The outsourcing of diving services in the salmon industry is responsible for the prevailing job insecurity and high accident rates. This labour reality places Chile with the highest mortality rate in the salmon industry worldwide. This is in sharp contrast with the Norwegian salmon industry, where the death of only one diver was recorded between 2012 and 2018.

### **Women in salmon processing**

Thirty-three per cent of Chilean salmon workers are women, who constitute nearly half of direct employment in processing plants. They work long hours, standing in cold and humid

conditions. Frequent urinary infections among the women are associated with the low temperatures and humidity. Their labour rights have feeble protections: Pregnant workers are considered unproductive, so women are often forced to leave because of the working hours, in violation of the country's laws protecting pregnant workers. Also, permits for medical check-ups or facilities to breastfeed children are difficult to obtain. The employers do not provide nurseries or crèches to the women.

Although intensive working conditions, seasonal jobs and low wages are rampant in Chilean food industries, it is surprising that such practices against women have not been checked by the authorities or by the transnational salmon companies, considering that they violate the laws in the countries where they are headquartered, and contravene the Guidelines for Multinationals of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Added to the high rates of occupational accidents in salmon

farming are other health hazards, caused by the intensive use of chemicals, such as antimicrobials, antiparasitics, potentially carcinogenic antifungals (malachite green and crystal violet), antifouling paints based on copper and heavy metals, as well as 36 types of disinfectants whose active compounds are hydrogen peroxide, chlorine dioxide and peracetic acid.

The work system in salmon processing plants encourages exploitation since wages are linked to workers' production volumes. The consequence is a prevalence of disabling musculoskeletal diseases among workers, associated with the long and strenuous work, performed standing up and repeated at a constant speed under cold and humid conditions.

In this context, workers' organizations have denounced a recent agreement between insurers and salmon companies to exclude tendonitis, carpal tunnel, lumbago or rotator cuff injuries—usually covered by the premiums—from being classified as occupational diseases in the salmon industry. It is interesting to note that the insurers, client companies and subcontractors do not carry out educational programmes on preventive measures to reduce accidents and injuries; nor do they provide hyperbaric medicine to underwater workers.

### **Anti-union practices**

Salmon companies regularly indulge in practices such as the use of multiple fiscal identification numbers to evade audits or legal responsibilities; the creation of parallel negotiating groups during salary negotiations; 'black lists' of workers who unionize; and the establishment of joint committees controlled by the companies. Workers' organizations have repeatedly denounced such anti-union practices, often carried out in collusion with labour and health inspectors. Organizations that fight against abuses are either blocked or intimidated. This explains why only 14 per cent of workers in the salmon industry are unionized, as opposed to 50 per cent in Norway.

### **Salmon transport workers**

The Chilean fleet for transporting live salmon and supplies has 729 vessels,

including 54 well boats whose number has been increasing steadily since 2020. There is a growing presence of Norwegian capital in these services.

The Federation of Officials of Merchant and Special Ships of Chile (Fenasiomechi) is fighting to implement minimum security provisions according to the guidelines and recommendations of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). In turn, it has promoted a bill to modify Decree Law 2222 on maritime navigation and accidents, to be able to establish responsibilities in the face of frequent fatal collisions between salmon farming vessels and fishing boats, partly due to the former's use of automatic pilot systems in internal waters in the Chiloe, Aysén and Magallanes regions.

Fenasiomechi has also demanded decent wages, since the transport workers' salaries are 25 per cent lower than the market standard. They have also demanded that the companies comply with stipulations for working hours and hours of rest in the labour code.

### **Salmon and the international market**

Fish is very important to the Chilean economy and livelihoods. Chile is the seventh-largest fish producer in the world—the global leader in cultivated trout, fifth in the export of algae for human consumption, and second in the production of both salmon and fishmeal. More than 80 per cent of Chilean industrial fisheries and aquaculture production is destined for international markets.

The new context of political, social and cultural transformations in Chile constitutes an opportunity to build a broad alliance between the socio-environmental movement, workers' and human-rights organizations, as well as coastal communities and indigenous peoples, with consumer organizations in international markets.

Social mobilization and citizen pressure in Chile, together with international influence, will lead to the necessary political will required to address the abusive practices of the salmon industry, which threaten the human rights of workers and the health

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of the oceans. Argentina has recently set an example, witnessing the first victory of the coastal communities over the salmon industry Goliath.

### **Argentina: The first to ban salmon farming**

On 30 June this year, the legislature of the Argentine province of Tierra del Fuego enacted into law a bill prohibiting the salmon farming industry from the waters of the Beagle Channel (Onashaga in the Yagán language) in the country's Patagonia region. The bill by deputy Pablo Villegas of the Fuegian Popular Movement, was approved unanimously by legislators, making Argentina the first country in the world to ban this transnational industry.

In Argentina, the only viable place for the establishment of the salmon farming in open-net pens is the pristine waters of the Beagle Channel, which is home to great terrestrial and marine biodiversity, including iconic species of mammals, birds and 50 per cent of the macroalgal forests—key carbon sinks—in the country.

Villegas pointed out that what happened “is a bet in favour of life and economic activities such as tourism, which generates employment and benefits various social sectors.” The message is clear: saying no to salmon farms is possible.

This blow to the transnational salmon industry was despite a major diplomatic push in both Argentina and Chile. In March 2018, the Norwegian King Harald V and Queen Sonja visited the Casa Rosada—seat of the Argentine government—to sign a co-operation agreement to study the feasibility of developing intensive salmon farming in Argentine Patagonia. The agreement was rejected because of demonstrations carried out by the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the neighbouring Yagan communities of Puerto Williams, the Commune of Cape Horn and Kawesqar of Puerto Natales in Chile, together with the various environmental organizations of both the South American countries.

Following this, the Norwegian Royals visited Chile in March 2019 to lobby for the expansion of the salmon industry into the pristine waters of the Magellan region. They travelled with an entourage of 60 businessmen to the cities of Punta Arenas and Puerto Williams in Chilean Patagonia, where they were received with strong protests from the local Yagan and Kawesqar communities and NGOs.

Civil society organizations and consumers in Chile, the United States, Canada, Argentina, Norway and Scotland—who produce and consume most of the farmed salmon in the world—must take advantage of this growing opposition and eliminate destructive salmon farming from one of most pristine regions of the planet. 3

#### **For more**

##### **The Salmon industry and human rights in Chile: Sector-Wide Impact Assessment**

<https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/salmon-industry-human-rights-chile-sector-wide-impact-assessment>

##### **Blood Salmon from the Global South**

<https://www.ecoceanos.cl/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SalmonesDeSangre-Ecoceanos-27mayo2019.pdf>

##### **Paradise Lost**

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_81/4398\\_art\\_Sam\\_81\\_art15\\_Chile\\_Salmon\\_J\\_C\\_C\\_Nez.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_81/4398_art_Sam_81_art15_Chile_Salmon_J_C_C_Nez.pdf)