

Irish fish producers' organisation



To The Chairman and Members
Joint Oireachtas Committee
Jobs Enterprise and Innovation
Houses of the Oireachtas
Dublin 2
14/09/2017

Dear Chair and members of the Committee, the Irish Fish Producers Organisation welcomes the opportunity to present to you on issues surrounding migrant workers in the Irish Fishing industry. Much has been said in the print media and on the airwaves since the Guardian newspaper broke its story in November 2015, on alleged abuses of migrant workers in the Irish fishing industry.

May I stress from the outset that neither I nor the organisation I represent here today in any way condone the mistreatment of any employee, be they Irish or non EEA within our industry or any other industry for that matter. The IFPO has been at the forefront in the national media condemning any abuses of human rights for both Irish and non Irish persons working within our industry. Like any industry there may be those not committed to abiding by the law, something we cannot and will not support. However, it is my view that very little has been said in the media positively about those for example in my organisation that are fully compliant with the Atypical scheme for migrant workers, and who are paying well above the minimum wage.

We as an Organisation do not support undocumented people working on fishing vessels and that is why we have always pushed for a permit scheme. As far back as 2008 the IFPO were writing to the government highlighting the issue with undocumented workers. I also wrote to Minister Richard Bruton in October of 2015 asking for a meeting to address employment issues within our industry, and in particular, asking that he consider a work permit for non EU citizens. I released those documents to the media two years ago to clear up any misconceptions the public may have had on where we stood on this issue.

It is important to point out that this happened before the Guardian broke its story or the Government set up a task force which ultimately resulted in a non EEA scheme for migrant workers within the Irish Fishing industry. Moreover, I wrote again to Minister Frances Fitzgerald in January of this year outlining clearly that the current scheme needed to be reviewed. In particular I felt that a non transferable permit put the employee at risk and left him/her vulnerable. That letter is before you.

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On the 3rd of July this year both the Migrant Rights Centre and the International Transport Workers Federation presented to this committee in relation to migrant non EEA workers within the Irish fishing industry. It was on foot of this that I wrote to this committee asking that the Fishing industry give its account, and in fact clarify a number of important issues. Having viewed the footage of that meeting I felt that the entire Irish fishing industry was painted as criminals and involved in slavery. I appreciate that much of the commentary was made under privilege and of particular concern to me was a suggestion that An Garda Siochana were tipping of fishing vessel owners prior to inspections or raids. This I found to be incredible and I can say with confidence here and now that this in my opinion has never happened. This is a very serious allegation.

I would now like to state some facts for the record:

The Committee has been told that only 42 permits were applied for under the scheme. Dermot Conway Solicitor, who is present today, can confirm that his office have dealt with 135 individual applications alone. There are of course other Solicitors processing these applications as well. This does not include the numbers for renewals.

The committee has been told that there are 1,500 Non EEA fishermen in the Country without a visa. As of the 20th of July 2017 the Work Place Relations Commission (WRC) had inspected 150 of the 176 whitefish vessels, and of the 5 prosecutions that are commencing, none relate to a crew member being on board without the necessary visa. (Source Website of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation).

I would like to conclude by saying the following. If the Migrant Rights Centre and the International Transport Workers Federation have evidence of mistreatment of non EEA workers within the Irish Fishing Industry, they have to hand that information to the WRC and An Garda Siochana. I find it incredible to think that serious allegations of criminal activity which they alluded to on the 3rd of July could be discussed in this house and that those files have not been furnished to the relevant authorities if they exist. I ask them to do that now in the interest of fairness to the employee, the employer, the WRC and the Garda Siochana. I would suggest – to not hand this information over would either suggest that they are not doing their job, or there is no such information to hand over. One way or the other, the accusations made are very damaging to the reputation of genuine fishermen and women, and the wider Irish Fishing industry.

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Thank you for taking the time to listen to me.

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