

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF FOR THE SHIN JI

BY KEITH INGRAM

Life aboard foreign charter fishing vessels (FCV) operating in our exclusive economic zone has been coming under increasing scrutiny in recent times as the true conditions and anti-competitive nature of these ships' managers are being revealed.

In the September/October 2009 issue of *Professional Skipper* we featured a story on the *Shin Ji*, where 11 crew jumped ship in protest at the appalling conditions on board.

In January of this year the same ship reported the death of a sailor who died while diving to clear a blockage in a live fish tank holding several tonnes of hag fish (blind eels). They are kept there to excrete and self-flush before processing and packing.

We understand the crewman was using shipboard breathing apparatus inappropriate for diving and was not appropriately suited, allowing the eels access to his body.

Who is responsible for onboard safety under safe ship management and occupational safety and health regulations? Or is this just another example of where SSM is failing our seafarers, and another reason to bring on MOSS, the new maritime operator safety system, as quickly as we can.

Because the *Shin Ji* was a foreign-flagged vessel fishing outside our 12-mile territorial zone, our authorities are unable to investigate the accident, so we now wait for the investigation report from the Korean Maritime Safety Authority.

Then, on May 26, we heard on Auckland's waterfront that a number of foreign nationals again wanted to jump ship from the *Shin Ji* because of ongoing mistreatment and pay disputes.

New Zealand's laws for ships using foreign national crews fishing in our EEZ is very clear. The Fisheries Act requires the minimum hourly wage of \$14.75 per hour (which includes a seagoing allowance) to be paid for hours worked. On April 1, the minimum wage increased to \$15 per hour.

Daily timesheets must be kept and the crew must be treated, fed and found as per the normal seafaring laws of the sea. Through its Code of Practice for foreign charter vessel crews, our government has attempted to establish an accountability framework to ensure these foreign seafarers are not taken advantage of or abused. But many companies seem to be paying lip service to the act and the Code of Practice.

When *Professional Skipper* magazine spoke to these seamen we discovered the playing field was far from level. To make matters worse, New Zealand companies and agents might be condoning (or ignoring) the problems on board and the poor pay.

In this case, it involves Indonesian seafarers who are mostly family folk of mainly Muslim belief. Most of them work hard and do not drink or take drugs, all good qualities any company would look for in its seafaring crews.

So where did we go wrong? Putting the onboard living and working conditions aside, this is a compliance and safety issue with the SSM companies, Maritime New Zealand and the Department of Labour. We asked the crew about their current pay arrangements and were surprised to learn what was happening from their perspective.

I wish to point out we have not spoken to the *Shin Ji's* Korean



officers. The crew told us they sign on for a 24-month swing and are paid US\$250 per month. Half of this is paid to the crewmember's bank account back home each month for their family, and Korean manning agents in Indonesia hold the other half to ensure the crew see out their contract. Deductions for flights and visas are commonly made from this amount.

The crew are expected to work no less than 10 hours a day and often for up to 18 hours a day when fishing and processing. They rarely, if ever, get a day off. During this time they earn an additional "bonus" payment of NZ\$250 per month, which is normally held along with their passport, and paid in cash on the bus at the airport to ensure they leave the country without complaint.

Assuming these crew work a 12-hour shift each day for a trip of 24 days, they should be paid NZ\$4248 per month or \$50,976 per year. This does not include days worked offloading or maintaining the vessel in port.

At present I can see they earn about NZ\$14,500, even converting the United States dollar for 24 months pay. So where does New Zealand's minimum wage of \$15 per hour, which includes the seagoing allowance, apply?

It does not take a mathematician or an accountant to figure out that companies can make a gross amount of profit by using foreign charter vessels and their low-paid crews to catch our fish. I see a lot of bean counters crunching the numbers for a profit and a heap of creative wage payments (and deductions) going on. Yet only one of the major players is prepared to come clean.

It gets worse the deeper we dig. I am becoming appalled at the level of disregard being demonstrated by some of our major role players in the deepwater fishing industry.

I make no apology for tarring the industry with a broad brush and challenge those who are without blame to stand up and be counted, because it seems peer pressure is the only way the industry can clean up these developing atrocities.

Meanwhile, we are seeing New Zealand public fishing companies with extensive FCV arrangements posting large profits in an export climate where our dollar is at an all-time high. 