

MEDIA STATEMENT

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FAWU CALLS FOR URGENT GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN THE SMALL PELAGIC FISHING INDUSTRY TO PROTECT JOBS, FOOD SECURITY AND THE ECONOMY

The Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), representing thousands of workers across the South African fishing value chain, has formally written to the Honourable Minister responsible for Fisheries and Marine Living Resources, requesting urgent intervention in the deepening crisis facing the Small Pelagic Fishing Industry.

This crisis is not merely an industry matter. It is a workers' issue, a food security issue, a coastal community issue and an economic issue. If not urgently addressed, it will have devastating consequences for workers, consumers, local production, industrial capacity and the broader South African economy.

FAWU represents workers across the fishing sector, including those in the Small Pelagic Sector, covering anchovy and sardine operations that are critical to fishmeal and fish oil production, as well as the canning industry. These are not abstract economic activities. They are the source of livelihoods for thousands of sea-going and land-based workers, and they sustain entire families and coastal communities.

Threat to Jobs, Wages and Coastal Communities

The ongoing crisis in the small pelagic sector has already placed severe pressure on workers employed in processing, canning, packing and related operations, including workers involved in the production of canned fish products such as Lucky Star.

Many workers now face the real threat of reduced working hours, short time, retrenchments and permanent job losses as declining catches and supply constraints undermine production levels. For workers who are already struggling with the high cost of living, any reduction in

working hours or wages means hunger, debt, inability to pay rent, school fees, transport costs and basic household expenses.

The impact of this crisis extends beyond individual workers. In many coastal towns, the fishing industry remains one of the few sources of stable employment. When factories slow down or close, entire communities suffer. Small businesses lose income, local economies shrink, and poverty deepens.

Consequences for Consumers and Food Security

FAWU is deeply concerned that this crisis will also hit poor and working-class consumers the hardest.

Canned fish remains one of the most affordable and accessible sources of protein for millions of South African households. At a time when food prices continue to rise and unemployment remains extremely high, products such as tinned pilchards are a staple in many homes.

Any disruption to local production, or increased reliance on imported sardines, will inevitably raise consumer costs. This will worsen food insecurity and force poor households to choose between food, electricity, transport, rent and other basic needs.

FAWU therefore warns that failure to protect the local small pelagic fishing industry will not only destroy jobs, but will also deepen hunger and inequality in working-class communities.

Total Allowable Catch and Industrial Sustainability

FAWU notes the interim 30 000-ton 14cm sardine Total Allowable Catch allocation for the current season. While the union fully recognises the importance of scientific sustainability and responsible resource management, we have been advised that the pelagic resource has shown significant improvement in status.

In this regard, FAWU believes there is scope for a carefully considered and science-based increase in the Total Allowable Catch to support local production, protect jobs and reduce dependence on imported sardines for canning.

South Africa cannot allow a strategic food-producing industry to decline while workers lose jobs and consumers pay more for basic protein. The country must defend local production, local beneficiation and decent employment.

FAWU also welcomes the interim 160 000-ton allocation of round herring. However, the union remains gravely concerned about the severely depleted anchovy biomass, which poses a direct threat to the long-term sustainability of employment for thousands of workers in the sector.

The Economic Importance of the Fisheries Value Chain

FAWU is calling for an urgent, comprehensive value-chain analysis across all commercial fisheries species.

Such an analysis is necessary to properly assess the fisheries sector's contribution to employment, industrial development, food security, exports, local manufacturing and Gross Domestic Product.

The fishing industry must not be treated merely as a matter of permits and quotas. It must be recognised as a strategic economic sector that supports workers, factories, transport, packaging, cold storage, retail, exports and local coastal economies.

Future policy decisions and allocations of fishing rights must therefore be guided by the need to maximise local beneficiation, industrial growth, food security and sustainable jobs.

Transformation Must Not Destroy Workers' Livelihoods

FAWU supports genuine transformation of the fishing industry. However, transformation cannot be used as a cover to destroy existing jobs, weaken productive capacity or enrich individuals who do not contribute meaningfully to the sector.

Transformation must benefit workers, communities and historically disadvantaged participants who are committed to building sustainable fishing operations. It must not produce paper owners, rent-seekers or speculative quota holders who profit without creating jobs or building industrial capacity.

The union will oppose any policy direction that destroys decent jobs under the guise of transformation while workers and poor communities are left to suffer.

FAWU Rejects Paper Quotas and Rent-Seeking

FAWU remains firmly opposed to the allocation of fishing quotas to entities or individuals who merely trade those quotas back to established operators for profit without participating meaningfully in fishing operations, employment creation or sector development.

These “paper quota” practices undermine the objectives of transformation, weaken the long-term viability of the industry and place workers’ livelihoods at risk.

Fishing rights allocations must be linked to operational capacity, employment retention, compliance with labour standards, investment in the sector and meaningful contribution to the fishing economy.

Reducing allocations to productive operators and sustainable enterprises in order to accommodate rent-seeking interests threatens jobs, food security and the future of the industry itself.

FAWU’s Call for Urgent Intervention

FAWU calls on the Minister and the Department to urgently engage organised labour and all relevant stakeholders to ensure that the South African fishing industry is managed in a manner that:

- Protects and expands sustainable jobs.
- Defends workers’ wages, benefits and job security.
- Safeguards food security for poor and working-class households
- Supports local production and industrial development.
- Advances genuine transformation and empowerment.
- Protects marine resources through scientific sustainability.
- Strengthens coastal economies and working-class communities; and
- Prevents speculative and exploitative quota practices that undermine workers and the sector.

FAWU reiterates that the future of the fishing industry cannot be decided without workers. Workers are the backbone of production and must be central to all discussions affecting the sector.

The union remains committed to defending workers, protecting local jobs, advancing food security and ensuring that South Africa’s marine resources are used to build a productive, transformed and socially just economy.

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