



Widespread Labor Rights Abuses Make Certain Countries Inappropriate Partners for a “Worker-Centered” IPEF Trade Deal

The severe labor rights abuses documented by U.S. government agencies year after year in Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei make those countries inappropriate partners for the new “worker-centered” trade policy the Biden administration seeks to establish through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

To benefit working people at home and abroad, any IPEF deal allowed to move forward must build off and improve upon the enforceable labor standards that Democrats successfully added to the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) — not take a step back from that benchmark. Countries not only need to agree on paper to uphold labor rights, but must accept ongoing enforcement mechanisms, including those like USMCA’s “Rapid Response Mechanism,” which the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative has used successfully during the Biden administration to remedy workplace-specific labor rights violations in Mexico. Further, demonstrating on-the-ground respect for labor rights should be a prerequisite for a country enjoying any of the commercial or other benefits of a trade agreement with the United States.

The ongoing rights abuses in the countries listed below would undermine IPEF’s goal of establishing a new model for international commercial ties and trade that prioritizes working people over corporate interests.

MALAYSIA

- Malaysia was downgraded to the lowest-possible tier in the U.S. State Department’s most recent report on human trafficking, which found, “The Government of Malaysia [does not meet the minimum standards for elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so.](#)” Few nations’ abuses are so dire as to trigger a “tier three” rating.
- Among other problems, the State Department found that the Malaysian government “did not adequately address or criminally pursue credible allegations from multiple sources alleging [labor trafficking, including in the rubber manufacturing industry and palm oil](#)

[sector](#), with the government owning 33 percent of the third largest palm oil company in the world.”

- Beyond agricultural and rubber-related industries, [trafficked labor was also documented in Malaysia’s export-heavy electronics and garment sectors](#).

PHILIPPINES

- The International Trade Union Confederation reported [at least 50 assassinations of Filipino labor leaders since 2019](#), with still other labor officials arrested on “trumped up charges” or “red tagged as a communist insurgent.”
- Beyond detailing “[threats and violence against union members](#),” the U.S. State Department also reports that Filipino employers are accused of utilizing short-term contracts and imported labor to “[minimize unionization and avoid other rights accorded to ‘regular’ workers](#).”
- The U.S. Labor Department’s list of [goods from the Philippines produced by child labor includes bananas, coconuts, fish, rubber, gold and fashion accessories](#).

VIETNAM

- Vietnamese law [does not allow workers to elect their own union officials](#) and prohibits strikes in what it deems “essential services,” including oil and gas production, telecommunications and air transportation.
- The U.S. State Department finds that “The Government of [Vietnam does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking](#),” with both forced labor and child forced labor found in the garment industry. Vietnamese law also does not prohibit debt bondage.
- [More than 5% of Vietnamese children may be victims of coercion](#) and other exploitation related to human trafficking.

THAILAND

- According to the U.S. State Department, Thai law “[does not protect union members against antiunion discrimination](#)” and “[does not allow migrant workers to organize trade unions](#).” The law further prohibits subcontracted labor and full-time workers from joining the same unions, and perhaps as a result, more than 45 percent of electronics and auto parts workers are subcontractors.
- The U.S. Department of Labor reports [forced child labor in Thailand’s shrimp and garment production](#), and forced labor in fishing.

- The U.S. State Department found, “The Government of [Thailand does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking](#),” with trafficking in both agriculture and manufacturing.

INDONESIA

- The Indonesian government recently [rolled back previously-existing labor standards](#), including in the areas of minimum wage, health care, maternity leave, severance pay and legal protections for employment contracts.
- The U.S. Department of Labor documents child labor in Indonesia’s palm oil, tobacco, rubber, tin mining, gold mining and other industries and says that [the Indonesian government fails to enforce child labor laws](#) throughout the country.
- The U.S. State Department finds that “The Government of Indonesia [does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking](#),” with forced labor found in fishing, palm oil production, mining and manufacturing.

BRUNEI

- The U.S. State Department reports that in Brunei, “The government [prohibits strikes, and the law makes no explicit provision for the right to collective bargaining](#)” and that the single active union or worker organization in the country, made up of Brunei Shell Petroleum workers, has demonstrated “minimal activity” for years.
- In 2019, Brunei [made gay sex punishable with execution by stoning](#). After international uproar, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah pointed to the country’s decades-long moratorium on the death penalty, but the law remains on the books and “The sultan made no mention of changes to other strict punishments ... [including] [whipping women convicted of having lesbian sex](#).”
- According to the U.S. State Department, “The Government of Brunei [does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking](#),” with trafficked labor found among migrant workers working in state-owned enterprises.

While labor rights abuses in Singapore are not as severe as in other proposed IPEF nations, Singapore is known for promoting some of [the worst “digital trade” provisions for working people in the world](#). To protect the rights of gig economy workers and to limit the offshoring of service sector jobs, the so-called “Singapore model” must not become the basis of any U.S. trade agreement’s digital provisions.

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