Minimal Returns

Colonial Minimum Wage Issues
and the Global Tuna Canning Industry

Until 2009, the StarKist Samoa cannery was the largest tuna factory in the world. Chicken of the Sea was the second-largest fish processor and exporter across the globe.\(^1\) Both of these canneries were located in American Sāmoa. Their products, whether packaged for high-end stores like Whole Foods, grocery chains like Trader Joe’s, or big-box stores like Walmart, were labeled “Made in the USA” because American Sāmoa is an unincorporated territory of the United States. But as an unincorporated territory of the U.S., federal labor laws do not apply equally, such as minimum wage and maximum work hours. This allowable divergence in work standards due to colonized status, as well as tax and tariff breaks, cheaper freight, lower insurance, and close access to fishing waters, has made American Sāmoa an attractive liminal political-legal and economic space for the tuna industry since the first cannery opened in 1953. Fish processing in American Sāmoa is a generally invisible aspect of U.S. and global seafood consumption. While chapter 1 discussed the various methods used to obtain seafood for tuna factories and fresh local consumption, this chapter focuses on the politics and economics behind the massive enterprise of canning tuna for the world.

According to food journalist Andrew Smith, fish canning started in the United States on the east coast in 1818 and the first can of tuna was produced in 1903.\(^2\) Canned tuna became popular during World War I as a cheap source of protein, and by the end of World War II the United States had the largest tuna fleet in the world. Smith explained how “by the late 1940s, Americans ate more tuna than any other fish or seafood.”\(^3\) Tens of thousands of people worked either directly or indirectly for the tuna industry. Today, Americans consume 29 percent of the canned tuna produced worldwide (almost all is imported to the
United States) and 84 percent of tuna comes from the western Pacific.\textsuperscript{4} Foreign domination of the industry in the twenty-first century stems from cheaper wages paid outside of the United States for both fishing and processing.

In 2007, as part of the push for minimum wage increases in the continental United States, Congress passed a federal law that required a fifty-cent wage increase every year until American Sāmoa wages were at the same level as states of the union. When the first mandatory increase was implemented in 2007, the minimum wage for cannery workers in American Sāmoa was raised from $3.26 to $3.76. That same year, the lowest legal wage in the fifty states was $5.85. By 2009, the federal U.S. minimum wage was $7.25, where it remained in 2018. After three fifty-cent increases in a row to $4.76, Chicken of the Sea announced the closure of its American Sāmoa cannery in 2009 and StarKist reduced its labor force by eight hundred people. Employment in American Sāmoa fell by 19 percent and cannery work decreased by 55 percent. This chapter examines the debates surrounding the minimum wage issue in the colonized space of American Sāmoa, as well as the historic and contemporary impacts that variable labor standards for this large-scale for-profit fishery have had on this Pacific Island region and United States politics and businesses.

Living in an American possession, U.S. colonials are subjects, not full-fledged members of the union with complete rights and privileges of citizenship.\textsuperscript{5} The economic needs of corporate fish canneries have historically been accommodated over worker welfare throughout U.S. rule in this region. This chapter will examine U.S. government prioritization of the monocrop industry of tuna canning in American Sāmoa, resulting variations in Fair Labor Standards, and the current lack of accommodation for indigenous appeals for tailored policies. Like in chapter 1, the functions of commercial marine practices and related labor regulations in American Sāmoa have increasingly been shaped by nonnative economic objectives that do not always coincide with indigenous goals, lifestyles, and traditions. Through tuna canning industry issues, American Sāmoans have been and continue to be colonially subjected, regulated, and controlled by the federal government. However, workers have remained loyal to this large-scale fishery due to on-the-ground social welfare employee benefits that acknowledge vā (social relations) obligations and incorporate forms of fā’a Sāmoa (the Sāmoan way of life) in their treatment of laborers.

As discussed in chapter 1, wage labor in American Sāmoa was a product of a World War II cash-based economy introduced to the region by Americans and supported by the U.S. federal government in the postwar period through the establishment of the fishing industry in the area. The controversy over wage
increases for cannery workers in the twenty-first century demonstrates the continuation of multiple interests and ideas connected to labor and wages in both American Sāmoa and the United States. In addition to impassioned statements by American Sāmoa government representatives, businesspeople, and the general public, politicians in the U.S. Congress actively participated in these discussions for the interests of their own constituents or political parties, often from opposite perspectives. While historically accommodated, the fiscal needs of this monocrop marine-based industry in the unincorporated territory of American Sāmoa has started to take a secondary position to larger federal issues of fair wages, jobs for U.S. citizens, and national security. As liminal U.S. colonials, the ground-level economics of American Sāmoans have always been subject to global tuna industry needs. In the twenty-first century, this indigenous group is now also being subsumed to the political goals of the fifty states.

Since the 1900 Deed of Cession agreement between the eastern Sāmoan mātai chiefs and the U.S. Navy, American Sāmoans have maintained unique control over their local jurisdiction. However, the U.S. Congress has the ability to impose rules on or veto actions by territorial governments, known as plenary power. In 2007, Congress used this overarching authority to address the issue of wage discrepancies between U.S. territories and U.S. states.

However, the inclusion of American Sāmoa in 2007 legislation was not a clear-cut issue. Initially, only the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands was targeted for wage standardization due to recent news coverage of poor working conditions in garment factories in that region. But according to a Washington Times article, “that would have left American Samoa as the only territory outside the federal minimum-wage rules. . . . Republicans said that smelled fishy, since Del Monte, the parent company of StarKist’s cannery, had headquarters in San Francisco, in the district Mrs. Pelosi [the Speaker of the House represented]. . . . In the ensuing days, Mrs. Pelosi insisted American Sāmoa be added, in order to equalize the law.” Despite these efforts to apply minimum wage standards throughout territories in the Pacific, American Sāmoa was not included in the 2007 Fair Minimum Wage Standard Law.

A few months later, Republican representative Mark Steven Kirk from Illinois added minimum wage hikes for American Sāmoa as an amendment to the “U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans’ Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act.” Once again, the larger party politics of the U.S. Congress, specifically Republicans’ attacks on Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, resulted in the inclusion of American Sāmoa in the minimum wage debate, not any request from American Sāmoans themselves. As a rider attached to a
much larger appropriations bill, increases in American Sāmoa minimum wage became law without any specific debate or discussion on the Congressional floor about its impact on this colonized region or its people.

In reaction to the partisan inclusion of American Sāmoa into this legislation, “democratic leaders promised to try to remove the amendment later in the legislative process but [according to the same Times article] never followed through.”

This political back-and-forth over the inclusion of American Sāmoa in minimum wage hikes highlights the precarious position U.S. colonials occupy under U.S. empire. While American Sāmoans generally have authority over local issues, the federal government holds ultimate control over the region. Important issues such as wage policies for tuna workers can consequently become subject to the maneuverings of party politics in Washington, D.C., that do not take into account the ground-level effect of such legislation on the local American Sāmoan economy and people.

As an unincorporated territory, American Sāmoa has had one nonvoting representative in the U.S. Congress since 1981. This delegate has the right to speak in Congress, but does not get to vote on legislation. Therefore, these U.S. colonials do not have the right to elect any leader who wields ultimate control over their region, such as the U.S. president or members of Congress. This status in terms of political representation is also true for the other U.S. territories of Guam, the Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 2010, the American Sāmoa Congressional representative Eni Faleomavaega reacted to the 2007 appropriations amendment by stating that Representative Kirk “knows nothing about American Sāmoa and did not have the courtesy to contact my office.”

Despite Faleomavaega’s request that Democrats remove American Sāmoa from the legislation, the bill passed with this region included. In 2015, American Sāmoa Congressional representative Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen called the inclusion of her home region in the 2007 legislation “an oversight.” Overall, American Sāmoan government representatives did not support changes to local minimum wage regulations due to the threat such raises would pose to the fishing industry in the region. But their colonial voices were not listened to. Instead, both state-level pushes for minimum wage increases and partisan politics propelled this legislation through Congress.

Ironically, if there was no controversy over labor standards in the Northern Marianas, these Pacific regions might never have been included in state-level minimum wage legislation; especially since no federal labor laws had developed in these areas since 1956. As territories on the periphery of the U.S. empire, these islands are often far off the radar, if not invisible to American politicians. But
when a controversial subject develops in the continental U.S., like the campaign for a living wage or nuclear threats from North Korea, these colonial territories come under full scrutiny and become subject to legislative decisions of the U.S. Congress. As the case studies in this book demonstrate, Western standards and goals do not always coincide with or impact indigenous groups in the same way as American citizens in states of the union.

History of the Tuna Industry in American Sāmoa

Tuna canning in American Sāmoa started within a decade of the rise in international canned fish consumption. According to Mansel Blackford, by 1944, canned tuna and canned salmon provided much of the seafood consumed at the time. Callum Roberts also stated how the “development of canning technology and the discovery that tinned tuna preserves wonderfully well created a product for which there was a ready market” in the interwar years. By the early twenty-first century, “the seafood industry was a thoroughly industrialized, globalized operation. About three-quarters of all seafood products were destined for direct human consumption. . . . Of the seafood eaten by humans, 49 percent went to market fresh, but 51 percent was processed. About half of the processed seafood was frozen, with much of the remainder canned. A whopping 37 percent of this total production entered international trade.” Since 1953, American Sāmoa has contributed to this major source of world protein through massive marine monocropping and production.

The Rockefeller Company set up the first fish cannery on Tutuila in 1953. Van Camp Seafood, a division of Ralston-Purina during that period, purchased the facility in 1954, which eventually became Chicken of the Sea in 1976. Thai Union, the seventh-largest supplier of seafood to the U.S. market in 2006, purchased Chicken of the Sea in 2000. After three federally mandated wage hikes in two years, this production line shut down in 2009. The Italian company TriMarine, the third-largest seafood provider for the United States in 2007, opened a cannery at this same location in April 2015, but closed operations in December 2016 after experiencing two government required pay increases in a year and a half.

The American Sāmoa Government (ASG) approved the opening of a second fish processing plant by H.J. Heinz Company in September 1962. The first shipment of canned tuna from this StarKist factory left Pago Pago harbor on October 4, 1963. In 2003, the canning arm of this company spun off into Del Monte Foods Company. In 2008, the Korean company Dongwon bought StarKist,
which was the ninth-largest supplier for the U.S. market in 2006. Despite reductions in labor force and work hours in the face of continual federal wage hikes, this facility continues to operate in 2018.

The shift from U.S.-owned fish processing companies to other countries showed how by the end of the twentieth century, “seafood companies have increasingly operated across national boundaries by entering into joint ventures, as Japanese processors did with American fishers, moves unintentionally encouraged by the U.S. declaration of a 200-mile economic exclusive zone.” With restrictions on who could fish where, discussed in chapter 1, different nations partnered with each other to gain better access to fishing grounds. Also evidenced by the twenty-first-century change of ownership for both Chicken of the Sea and StarKist in American Sāmoa, “processors acquired foreign subsidiaries to be close to their major overseas markets.” After purchasing StarKist Samoa, Dongwon also took control of the can-producing factory across the street, demonstrating “vertical integration, [where] company officers join the various stages in their businesses, from raw materials to production through sales.” Such control over all phases of the manufacturing process was occurring in other industries at the same time, like the auto industry with joint ventures by Ford and Mazda in the 1980s. American Sāmoa was an ideal location for being close
to tuna fishing grounds as well as controlling both fishing and processing in American territory.

The U.S. federal government fostered the development of the tuna processing industry to expand the economy of American Sāmoa in the post–World War II era through variable labor standards, generous tax and tariff breaks, and subsidies for supplies, transportation, and insurance. According to Richard Barnet and John Cavanagh, “poor countries with unorganized work forces are attractive production sites for global companies, whatever flag they fly. Higher profits, labor peace, access to natural resources of the region and to local markets are powerful incentives” for factory locations.20 Cheap labor combined with U.S. and territorial tax subsidies and exemptions, plentiful fish nearby, tuna treaties, as well as low insurance, fuel, labor, and freight costs to facilitate the profitability of tuna canneries in this colonized Pacific region.

Allen Stayman has studied how “the United States has embraced a pragmatic and flexible approach to building stable relations” in U.S. territories which included “extended special trade, tax, wage, financial assistance, and other privileges to support the growth of the Islands’ less-competitive market economies.”21 In American Sāmoa, U.S. tax credits since 1976 have resulted in exemptions equivalent to that of U.S. corporate income taxes.22 Tariff relief made this unincorporated territory of the United States even more attractive. According to a Department of Labor report in 2007, “shipments of canned tuna or other products from American Samoa into the United States are not subject to tariff rates... because American Samoa is a territory of the U.S. and is not considered to be an exporter.”23 Conducting business in a region that was part of the United States but not a full-fledged member of the union provided economic benefits on both sides of this political-legal liminality for the tuna industry. For tax purposes, American Sāmoan products were considered domestic. But for national labor regulations, like minimum wage, this area did not have to maintain the same standards.

Since the beginning of cannery involvement in the region, the ASG has also collaborated with tuna industry leadership and Washington, D.C., officials to develop local tax breaks, tariff cuts, and other incentives to maintain factories in the area. For example, the territorial administration allows significant exemptions from its own corporate tax laws that could result in up to 44 percent savings on corporate income.24 In 1962, the federally appointed governor of American Sāmoa, Idaho native H. Rex Lee, stated how “the Government of American Samoa is fully prepared to cooperate fully with any fishing fleet delivering fish to the Star-Kist plant in Pago Pago.”25 This commitment to the economic success
of U.S. fish companies, and as a by-product the American Sāmoa economy, has continued among local leaders in the region into the twenty-first century. In fact, a fear over the loss of this main industry in the region has and continues to shape the opinions and actions of these leaders.

Carrying the “Made in the USA” label provided even more enticement for canneries to function in American Sāmoa, particularly because the U.S. military only purchases tuna canned within U.S. jurisdiction. The Buy American Act of 1993 “attempts to protect domestic jobs by providing a required preference for American goods in direct government purchases.”26 The Berry Amendment to this legislation in 2014 “is a ‘super percentage’ status which requires the Department of Defense, when purchasing certain goods, to purchase goods that are 100% American in origin.”27 Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (Wespac) Fisheries program officer Mark Mitsuyasu believed the future success of canneries in American Sāmoa depends on how valuable the “Made in the USA” label remains for companies. “It was an advantage, it still is an advantage.”28 While labor may be cheaper in Southeast Asia or South America, gaining a monopoly on tuna supplies for the U.S. military makes production in this generally invisible colonial space a major benefit. In fact, according to Barnett and Cavanagh, “by 1991 more than half of all U.S. exports and imports were transfers of components and services within the same global corporation, most of them flying the American flag.”29 But as tuna canning in American Sāmoa shows, production under U.S. jurisdiction does not necessarily mean fair wage jobs for U.S. citizens. The liminal space of U.S. territories and possessions provides economic and political loopholes for businesses.

However, for fish canneries to stay in American Sāmoa long term, these corporations “need to see predictable costs.”30 This idea of the economic bottom line for businesses was echoed by many interviewed.31 According to StarKist production manager Carlos Gonzalez, there are two important factors for factory profitability: 1) fish prices and 2) fuel prices.32 If either of these two aspects goes up, the profit for the company goes down. Dan Sullivan, vice president of production for TriMarine in 2015, also remarked that the price of fish, labor costs, and freight costs were all critical inducements for opening and maintaining a factory location in the area.33

One disadvantage Sullivan identified for American Sāmoa as a cannery site involved the fact that the region was subject to a multitude of federal regulations, such as those monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Health Advisors, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Complying with the numerous and costly rules for health and safety
standards overseen by each of these bureaucracies results in more expended effort and higher costs to a company’s bottom line.

In 2015, StarKist spokesperson Michelle Faist stated that “American Samoa has had three things in its favor—duty free access to the U.S. market that is now nearly irrelevant, a wage system reflective of the local economy rather than the mainland economy, and a reliable supply of direct-delivered fish... all of these factors have been negatively impacted in the last six months” due to minimum wage increases, fishing limits, and the Pacific Trade Treaty that eliminated tariffs among member nations.34 Such tuna industry rhetoric about tenuous stability in the fiscally colonized space of American Sāmoa has occurred since their opening in the 1950s.

According to Barnet and Cavanagh, “Corporations dream of escaping the laws of any nations that restrict the free movement of goods, info, and profits. But at the same time global companies everywhere look to their home governments to protect their existing markets and to provide muscle for penetrating new markets, to keep labor and environmental costs down, and to subsidize their operations in various ways.”35 This general dual desire of businesses to obtain legal and monetary advantages in both a free market and through home government regulations typifies the actions and motivations of the tuna industry as well. But “government treatment of their home-based corporations can result in competitive advantages or disadvantages” as seen with the benefits of tax and tariff relief versus the burden of national health and environmental requirements in American Sāmoa.36 Tuna canneries, like the sugar industry in Hawai‘i and the oil refining industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands, have always tried to create an overall advantage from this variety of pros and cons for setting up shop in an unincorporated territory of the United States.37

History of Wage Rates in American Sāmoa

The fish processing industry has historically threatened to leave American Sāmoa if minimum wage became too high. In 1956, the U.S. Congress debated legislation to exempt American Sāmoa from the wage and hour provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. In March 1956, Vaiinupo J. Ala‘ilima, King Malietoa’s great-great-grandson and an employee of the Army Corps of Engineers, testified at a House Education and Welfare subcommittee in Washington, D.C., to plead against any policy that kept wages down to attract industries to American Sāmoa. He believed the application of the national minimum wage
standard of one dollar an hour would “protect our people from being exploited for cheap labor and likewise slow down the industrialization of our little country.” However, the Van Camp Seafood Company insinuated throughout these Congressional hearings that it might need to leave the islands if required to pay one dollar an hour. As the only industry in American Sāmoa, which was already operating at a loss, Van Camp employed three hundred island women for their tuna packing plant.

The cannery’s acknowledgment of a potential shutdown in the face of increased wages raised deep concerns for both American and Sāmoan leadership. Congressional leaders feared that the departure of this main source of income for the area would tank the local economy. Indigenous leaders also submitted a resolution urging an exemption from the Fair Labor Standards Act for similar reasons.

At a hearing for the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in May of that same year William D. Moore, overseas operations manager for the Van Camp Seafood Company, stated that “a minimum wage of $1 per hour, as required under present laws, is unrealistic, unwarranted, and unquestionably will have a deleterious effect upon the economic and social structure of the islands.” Van Camp did not think American Sāmoans should be compensated at the same level as continental U.S. workers due to lower productivity, stereotypically explained by the high humidity of the tropical region. Consequently, the company paid American Sāmoan cannery workers twenty-seven cents per hour. Linton Collins, legal counsel for Van Camp, also stated that “the company has found that it takes from 3 to 5 Samoan workers to perform what 1 continental worker in the United States will do. It is, therefore, felt that this justifies a lower rate for Samoans.” While Ala’ilima wanted to protect the dignity and worth of native workers, the racist rhetoric of Van Camp leaders highlighted the prioritization of corporate profit goals and the lower valuation of U.S. colonial labor.

Because government officials were more concerned with losing this vital industry in the region than fair treatment of indigenous laborers, the U.S. Congress chose to not raise wages. As Senator John F. Kennedy expressed in the final discussion of this legislation in July 1956, exclusion from the labor standards act would be “essential if the Samoan economy is to continue to operate.” Consequently, Van Camp successfully obtained an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act that exempted the tuna industry from paying workers in American Sāmoa the federal minimum wage. Such an exception from national work requirements highlights one major impact that colonial status has had on
American Sāmoans. Both the monetary and figurative values of their colonial labor were minimized for the benefit of the large-scale for-profit tuna industry.

Before the U.S. Congress imposed the required wage increase on American Sāmoa in 2007, pay rates were handled by a Special Industry Committee composed of voting representatives from the canneries, the private sector, and the government. This committee formed as part of Van Camp’s 1956 request for an exception to the Fair Labor Standards Act. The American Sāmoa Special Industry Committee met intermittently until 2007 to assess the economy “and to make recommendations for a sub-minimum wage in certain industries.” This group was supposed to take the specific ground-level reality of daily life in American Sāmoa into account when discussing possible pay rate increases, especially for cannery workers. Ultimately, this entity favored the profit-oriented interests of fish exports from the region over wage increases, similar to the capture of fishery council members discussed in chapter 1. Only once, in 1986 when employees testified to the Special Industry Committee for a pay raise, did tuna workers’ pay match U.S. minimum rates of $3.35 per hour. But the next year, due to the complaints lodged by the fish processing industry, wages decreased back to $2.82. From 1999 to 2007, tuna canning pay only increased once, from $3.17 to $3.26 an hour.

In 2008, Delegate Faleomavaega felt the Special Industry Committee was biased and useless. In a U.S. Senate Committee hearing he stated how “the industry committee structure for American Samoa was intended to be an interim measure but it remained in effect until last year when it was abolished by the enactment of P.L. 110–28 [2007 wage increase legislation]. I supported its abolishment because special industry committees were a sham and an insult to the intelligence of every hourly worker in American Samoa.” Congressman Faleomavaega did not feel that this assessment group provided a fair evaluation of the economic possibilities for better treatment of fish workers in American Sāmoa. Instead, the needs of the tuna canneries were prioritized. In 2010, Democratic House representative George Miller from California also stated how “in decades past, the use of a special industry committee to periodically review and set the minimum wage in American Samoa proved ineffective, unfairly depressing wage levels below what was economically feasible.” Both politicians believed the fish industry could have paid higher rates over time, but the wage committee consistently chose not to upset and potentially lose the business of tuna processing companies.

While there was no Special Industry Committee in the Hawaiian Islands, the monopoly of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association during the first half
of the twentieth century also set the wages for the entire sugar industry in this colonized Pacific archipelago. Wages were standardized throughout the region and workers who broke their contracts, or caused trouble by trying to organize for higher pay, were blackballed from the industry.\(^\text{53}\)

While federal officials in Washington, D.C., spoke negatively about the Special Industry Committee, several years after the dissolution of this entity, some in American Sāmoa supported the reestablishment of a similar type of group. Territorial leaders and businesspeople interviewed in 2014 and 2015 spoke positively about this historic process that decided if a pay increase was necessary as well as sustainable in this unincorporated territory. Togiola Tulafono, the American Sāmoa governor from 2003 to 2013, stated that the industry committee was a good concept because it “constantly looked at the economy of American Sāmoa and wage increases were not something forced upon us.”\(^\text{54}\) Tulafono believed that if the government does not “fix structure of wages and people are fairly compensated” this approach can “sustain industries.”\(^\text{55}\) ASG human resources director Sonny Thompson also believed that an industry committee could help American Sāmoa “meet what we can afford.”\(^\text{56}\) He even recommended a pro-rated increase. Private businessperson Patricia Letuli stated that the government should go “back to letting our own locals look at businesses and government, how we want to structure wage rate.”\(^\text{57}\) According to these leaders, a dedicated organization that takes local colonial circumstances and issues into account seemed to be the best solution to balance the different sides involved in pay rates.

Such rhetoric continued in 2017 with Representative Amata introducing legislation for the restoration of this group.\(^\text{58}\) The American Sāmoa governor and director of the American Samoa Department of Commerce supported this bill.\(^\text{59}\) As U.S. colonials, American Sāmoan leaders have historically negotiated a delicate balance between cooperation with fish corporations and the federal government, which each funded one of the two major aspects of the regional economy. The historic belief in, and action based on, the heavy dependence of the area on the tuna industry persists into the twenty-first century.

Current cannery leadership also uses the specter of increased wages as a reason to leave American Sāmoa. In May 2015, both canneries functioning at the time, StarKist and TriMarine, as well as the American Sāmoa Chamber of Commerce, vocalized their opposition to a 2015 wage increase. According to TriMarine’s chief operations officer Joe Hamby, “Tri Marine has invested significantly in Sāmoa Tuna Processors and increasing labor costs with a higher minimum wage would make the company’s already difficult job even tougher. We are just starting. Increasing costs will obviously have a very negative impact
on our young business. We simply can’t afford a wage hike.” In fact, a U.S. Department of Labor report explained that in order to replicate a similar effect of the American Sāmoa minimum wage increase schedule, “the U.S. minimum wage would need to be raised to more than $16.50 per hour.” This statement puts the enormous impact of wage increases on American Sāmoa into a continental U.S. perspective. Pay increases clearly displease the fish industry and has historically been accommodated by both the territorial and federal government. This pattern started to shift in the twenty-first century.

Various Local Perspectives

Online, a hot debate developed when the local newspaper Sāmoa News published an article on minimum wage hikes. The imposition of Western standards in American Sāmoa garnered much passion and some conflicting opinions. In May 2015, there were fifty-seven posts by fifteen different people debating whether or not U.S. minimum wage standards should be applied in the region. The majority of the commentators believed fish canneries were exploiting workers and being greedy. Tofaeono Hollywood stated how “it is about time for the American Samoa government officials to campaign to end exploitation of Samoa employees on an hourly rate of just $5.26 to increase to a humane rate as Mainland U.S.” There were twenty-two other pro-minimum wage hike comments in addition to this one.

However, fourteen online posts worried that raising the minimum wage would result in the loss of this major industry and job creator. Troyboy expressed that “raising the minimum wage is not a job creating idea. It will be a job killer. It will only benefit those who are currently working. Some will probably start losing their jobs when employers counter with lay-offs. . . . We don’t even pay rent like the U.S. Our bills are not as high as the U.S and yet we want to make the same money Americans are making?” While not all of the people posting about business considerations were against fair wages, this particular group of commentators believed that maintaining low wages was part of rational corporate decision making and realistic economic policies for the ground-level situation in American Sāmoa. Such concepts were grounded in Western concepts about business.

Several posts also discussed the lower cost of living in American Sāmoa compared to the continental United States. Troyboy’s statement about not paying rent refers to the fact that all land in the region is owned by American Sāmoans. According to Representative Amata, “in American Sāmoa, the cost of living is
drastically different. Due to how the lands are owned and managed in American Sāmoa there’s actually no such thing as rent or mortgage items that often comprise up to one half of a person’s monthly expenses. Because our people do not have an expense for housing, $4.76 an hour goes much further than it would here in the States.  

While cash wages are needed to pay for electricity and imported items, families in American Sāmoa can survive without such conveniences and live off ‘āiga land. One U.S. dollar in American Sāmoa can be stretched further in an extended clan system that has access to communal sharing and sustainability through plantation farming and sea life gathering than the average family household in the continental United States.

These indigenous factors were some of the reasons Representative Amata expressed how “the playing fields in the United States and American Sāmoa are too drastically different to place on the same wage scale. And to keep American Sāmoa tied to the current standard is dangerous and irresponsible.” Daily life in American Sāmoa is quite different from the continental United States. Imposing Western criteria on this region ignores the reality of native lifestyles in the area. Representative Amata’s comment also reiterated the constant fear of some in American Sāmoa that an incommensurate increase in wages could drive away the fish canneries.

Another commentator in the online Sāmoa News debate suggested the development of a survey that would “ask all the people that work there [canneries] as well as all the minimum wage earners at the government and other private businesses. See what they have to say. Compare the results from each entity. After all, this is about them.” This post received two comments. Steve agreed that “a scientific study like you mentioned is the way to go. People on this blog probably do not represent the majority. Come to think of it I always earned above minimum wage even in High School and college.” In contrast to this positive response, the controversial and heated nature of this issue came out when another commentator Niuveve responded by saying, “Not about stupid surveys—follow the law of the land. . . . I make choices for the people—feel better. Don’t go away mad—just go away.” This post highlighted the frustration some in American Sāmoa feel at the constant use of Western-style surveys, reports, consultants, and paperwork (particularly by the government) to address problems in the region. Scientific and sociological studies have frequently been conducted in the islands, taking up the time and resources of the local community. But direct action rarely developed from these efforts.

Scholar James C. Scott discussed how government observation and categorization of native peoples ultimately helps political leaders wield control over a
In the case of American Sāmoa, information gathering and research could placate the public by identifying problems and demonstrating a desire to investigate issues, as well as provide education and awareness to the people. However, this gathered knowledge has often not resulted in massive changes in government policy or direction. Some would prefer outside surveyors just leave and not return. Information gathering in American Sāmoa is discussed more in chapter 4.

Niueve’s post also highlights how some in American Sāmoa prioritize indigenous cultural values and practices over Western knowledge making and logic. This commentator’s focus on “the law of the land” directly references conventional Sāmoan political and social structures where people in the community take care of one another in times of need, part of vā and fa’a Sāmoa. According to Karen Armstrong, David Herdrich, and Arielle Levine, “The basic units of Sāmoan social structure were (and are) the family and village. Unlike Western society, the family was the central unit rather than the individual, and unlike Western capitalist society, the emphasis was on reciprocity rather than individual accumulation. . . . The generous distribution of food marked—and still marks—every occasion, and from the 19th century into the early 20th century, fish and marine produce were central items in the circulating baskets of food.”70 Due to strong ‘āiga ties in American Sāmoa, no one should go hungry or be homeless.

Researcher Felix Kessing also stated that “high virtues are to be polite, kind and generous to relatives, friends and dependents. . . . prestige comes through generous distribution, not accumulation, of wealth.”71 Such expectations of reciprocity, or vā among community members are fundamental to Sāmoan culture and native views on providing appropriate support for their families. Under these same principles of fa’a Sāmoa, employers should also treat Sāmoan workers in a caring and compassionate way. So whether in the 1950s or the 2010s, pay rates that support one’s family in exchange for labor have always been a point of concern between indigenous peoples and tuna canneries in American Sāmoa.

While most people interviewed for this project recognized the need to find other industries to support the local economy, some believed tuna canning was the best industry for what they viewed as an isolated region in the Pacific. According to the ASG director of Human and Social Resources and former cannery employee Taeaoafua Dr. Meki Solomona, “Canners are a viable economic asset that needs to be retained. . . . American Sāmoa does not have a lot to offer, but we have tons of fish. How to maximize that opportunity for our people[?] . . . I’d rather keep what’s here and work on it than bring other” industries in.72 Representative Amata further stated that “the tuna canning industry is all we
have. There’s no Coca Cola or IBM. We have no Silicon Valley there to provide massive revenue and employment opportunity to the territory. There aren’t numerous military and government facilities that provide sources of economic growth. We are not surrounded by fellow states that enable us to expand to other markets. All we have is the tuna industry and we are grateful.”73 While American Sāmoan politicians easily spoke out against the imposition of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on indigenous fishing rights in chapter 1, a deferential and dependent tone represents the dominant perspective of several American Sāmoan political leaders towards the corporate tuna industry.

If the economics of American Sāmoa were more similar to that of American states, minimum wage might be more sustainable or have less of a detrimental impact. But that is not the case in the unincorporated territory of American Sāmoa. These leaders believed concentrated efforts were needed to maintain the tuna industry in the islands. As discussed in chapter 1, fishing and subsistence from the local ocean were already parts of Sāmoan culture, making canning a logical business for this particular location.

Some in American Sāmoa believed the application of minimum wage increases was a prime example of the region being unfairly treated like a full-fledged state of the union. In August 2015, the American Sāmoa Commerce Department identified $5.67 as the minimum wage needed for a family of six to live in the territory.74 This amount was $1.58 less than the final amount targeted by the federal wage hike legislation, but also fifty-one cents lower than the territorial minimum wage in 2017.

In addition to different standards of living on island, Letuli stated continental “minimum wage is not fair to this island” because the rate was not compatible to other Pacific Islander nations.75 For example, minimum wage in neighboring Independent Sāmoa was the U.S. equivalent of fifty cents while nearby Fiji’s basic wage was about ninety-one U.S. cents an hour. There was no minimum wage in Tonga. Workers in American Sāmoa earned considerably more than laborers in comparable positions on adjacent island nations. In that context, some American Sāmoa leaders thought that the fairest thing to do, in terms of overall Pacific Islander labor relations, involved keeping jobs in the region instead of driving the fish industry away from American Sāmoa. Due to these circumstances, Solomona stated how “in Seattle 15 cents might make sense. No way that 10 to 15 cent raises is manageable in American Sāmoa. Please allow us to make those decisions to maintain these huge companies.”76 Solomona did not support matching continental U.S. rates because the leveling of pay did not
take the economic realities of the unincorporated territory of American Sāmoa into account.

Only one of five commentators to the Sāmoa News article about the impact of the 2015 wage hikes in American Sāmoa discussed how the pay increase was unnecessary due to the lower cost of living in American Sāmoa. Joe Taeao claimed that “technically, this minimum wage increase is hogwash. Our minimum wage in American Samoa should factor in surrounding island nations. Since we import most of our goods; with many produced in China; our issue is not inflation and increase in cost of living but more towards people wanting higher wages.”

While Taeao also pushed for diversification of industries in American Sāmoa, he did not believe a blanket application of the continental U.S. standard of living was appropriate in the region.

In contrast, the other four commentators on the site expressed that “those who own the canneries ARE NOT WILLING TO MEET THE DEMANDS OF THE MINIMUM WAGE HIKE. Their bottom-line is the number one concern and they will not give in to the notion of paying higher wages. They are in American Samoa to make money—period. . . . Since the 1950s this industry has taken over $60 billion worth of fish from our oceans and they have NEVER PAID LIVING WAGES to their workers” Pomase and other commentators bemoaned the exploitation of native people and the greediness of the tuna industry.

Just like the Large-Vessel Prohibited Area debate discussed in chapter 1, American Sāmoans have a diversity of opinions about the minimum wage issue. Individuals, regardless of their position, willingly expressed their dissatisfaction with U.S. federal actions that did not take their ground-level indigenous and colonial reality into account. While some understood Western-style logics for business function and profitability, others emphasized the particularities of daily life in American Sāmoa from a native perspective.

Worker Experiences

While many acknowledge the economic benefits of the tuna industry, no one denies the arduous nature of work in the factories. Tuna canning is an extremely labor-intensive process. First, frozen fish are off-loaded from large purse seiner ships or longline vessels at the dock. Unloaders hunch over the fish onboard with machete-type instruments, chucking and sorting the frozen products into metal bins below according to size. Once separated, the fish go through an initial cleaning process, basically the manual removal of the head and the tail. These
Fish are then wheeled by hand into a cold storage freezer until the canning line is ready for that particular species. Once the type of fish to be canned for the shift is determined (like albacore, wahoo, yellowfin, skipjack, or bigeye), the appropriate bins are removed by workers from cold storage and thawed out, or precooked, by traveling through a semi-automated line of hot water baths or steam chambers. The softened fish are then mechanically transported to the fish processing floor, an expansive warehouse room where rectangular tables are set up in long rows. Women standing on their feet for eight-hour shifts at a time remove fish scales and skin, as well as debone the fish, all by hand. The cleaned fish are then tossed by the laborers onto a conveyer belt that transports the fillets down the line to be canned, either as solid tuna or through the chopper into chunk tuna. In American Sāmoa, drivers forklift canisters from the container-making factory across the street. When put into the canning line, these metal cylinders first go through a heated sanitation step, then get mechanically filled with fish. Oil or water, depending on the type of tuna being processed, is subsequently added. Then a machine seals the lid onto the can. The canisters are heated to sanitize the containers one more time and finish cooking the fish. Then the products go through the automated labeler and are stacked onto pallets that are manually shrink wrapped for transport and loaded by workers into shipping containers bound for the United States and beyond. Cannery work is physically demanding, repetitive, dangerous, smelly, and exhausting.

On average, with one hundred people on a line, a facility can produce three hundred to six hundred containers a minute, which amounts to about 540,000 canisters per day, or almost six shipping containers a day. At the peak of tuna canning in 2005, the industry exported $4,463,820,000 in processed fish. This amount was 98 percent of all total exported goods from American Sāmoa. While the market share of global tuna supply from American Sāmoa has declined since the wage increases of 2007, this region's economic dependence on this industry continues through 2016.

The canning process for salmon is similar to tuna. However, the Alaskan salmon industry used the laborsaving device the “Iron Chink” to mechanically cut the tail and heads off fish. While early supporters of this technology believed the machine resulted in the replacement (hence cost savings) of ten to twenty workers, hand cleaning always results in the least amount of fish waste. A combination of hand and mechanized cleaning developed from the 1920s, enabled by the homogenous size of fish from salmon runs. Despite such a technological innovation in seafood processing, canneries in American Sāmoa continued to use manual labor since wages were low, hand cleaning resulted in more fish product
to can, and tuna fish sizes were more variable. Regardless of these differences in
tuna and salmon industry automation, cannery work was always laborious and
involved some level of intense manual work.

The monocrop agriculture of sugar cane cultivation in the colonized space of
Hawai‘i was also physically difficult, requiring hard manual labor all day in the
dusty fields of volcanic soil, prickly cane stalks, and the hot sun. In the colonized
Hawaiian Islands, heavy industrial exploitation of workers occurred through
the post–World War II period, when laborers finally surmounted race-based
divisions created by the sugar industry and unionized across race and ethnicity.83 Such labor organizing for higher wages, the transition of Hawai‘i from a
U.S. territory to a state of the union, and a growing sugar beet industry in the
continental United States all contributed to the decline of the sugar industry in
this Pacific archipelago.84

While the idea of higher wages initially seemed attractive to cannery work-
ers in American Sāmoa, the constant fear over losing their jobs eventually
convinced laborers to not support further wage increases. According to Brett
Butler, general manager for the StarKist Sāmoa cannery from 2005 to 2014, 85
percent of StarKist Sāmoa’s workforce in the twenty-first century came from
Independent Sāmoa.85 This distribution was similar for the other cannery in
the territory. All foreign workers must be sponsored by an American Sāmoan,
typically an extended family member who sometimes garnishes part of the indi-
vidual’s wages or expects additional free domestic assistance in the home, such
as cooking and cleaning. Some of these laborers have very little education and
few economic options. Hourly workers get paid every week at a much higher rate
than wages in their home region. According to Solomona, “now a good number
of those are from outside, they come here for opportunities. Minimum wage,
American money... jobs for people who never gone to school to those with a
Ph.D. in science... opportunity for everyone, not everyone seeks college degrees.
If [they] flunk out of high school, they can work as long as they are 18 years old.”86
As non-indigenous laborers with temporary status in the region, these workers
have chosen not to make a fuss over raising the minimum wage in exchange for a
steady job and a relatively good income over the years for this region of the world.

According to a Sāmoa News article, “in the 1970s, a union was formed at
Samoa Packing, however, its existence was short-lived reportedly because of dif-
ficulties in collecting membership dues from members.”87 Teamsters also tried
Cannery leadership usually held meetings the day or night before workforce
voting on unionization to remind laborers about the financial burden of union
fees. Since pay was already low, the thought of regularly giving away a portion of their small paycheck deterred many workers from joining year after year.

However, as a result of these campaigns the fish industry usually increased social welfare benefits at the factory. For example, after unionization efforts in 1994, StarKist offered “paid vacation for employees calculated on years of services and hours at work and life insurance that provides for families of employees who die from work related accidents to receive up to $10,000. There is also a funeral benefit entitling employees to receive $350.00, ten cases of wahoo and two large fish, when a member of their immediate family dies. In addition, StarKist Sāmoa operates a pension plan fully funded by the company which retiring employees benefit from.”

Scholars have examined the role industrial welfare programs play in maintaining worker loyalty and diffusing labor protests or unionization without drastically improving wages or the work environment. Similarly in American Sāmoa, these gestures, both big and small, were often greatly appreciated by workers as employer recognition of and assistance in maintaining va’a and fa’a Sāmoa. Subsidies that acknowledged cultural and family obligations to provide money, food, and time off for special occasions (such as funerals) effectively raised laborer satisfaction, deflected organizing efforts, and reduced demands for pay increases.
By 2014, workers surveyed by the federal government accounting office “generally opposed further minimum wage increases, expressing concerns that any increase would result in lost jobs or a complete closure of Star-Kist.” The reality of downsizing and the reduction of hours, as well as the constant threat of canneries transferring to cheaper labor locations, persuaded workers to accept current, stable pay rates, a familiar scenario of economic intimidation historically used by corporations worldwide. In 2015, StarKist employee Line Tautama stated that “we want the minimum wage to come but when we think of the one economy we have here that we might as well save what we’ve got right now to feed our families, put food on the table and do all such things. I will take whatever it’s gonna take.” A steady job to provide for one’s family has always been priority for workers over increasing wages in American Sāmoa. Employer acknowledgment of vā fealoa’i (social respect) obligations and accommodations to meet the cultural expectations of fā’a Sāmoa also made the dirty job good enough.

Recent Legislation

After the first three wage hikes from 2007 to 2009, the U.S. Congress agreed to delay further increases from 2009 to 2011 for both American Sāmoa and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands due to the increased unemployment that occurred since pay changes were implemented. By 2009, American Sāmoa employment was down 17 percent and jobs in the Marianas were down 24 percent. According to Representative Doc Hastings of Washington State, who led the Republican efforts for this legislation in the House, “the Democrat Congress voted to pass a minimum-wage increase for these territories in 2007, and therefore, it was only appropriate that they vote again to fix it. . . . In doing so, Democrats were admitting that they were wrong to impose this policy that cost real people their jobs.” Even though Hastings referenced the negative impact that wage hikes had on workers in these island territories, the overall tone of his comments focused more on exposing the failure of Democratic legislation and Congressional party politics than the needs and issues facing peoples of the Pacific.

In 2011, the U.S. Congress passed the Insular Areas Act that modified the minimum wage increase in American Sāmoa from a yearly basis to a triennial basis and halted any pay hikes from 2012 to 2014. This act also stopped any wage increases between 2012 and 2014. Representative Miller from California stated that “precisely because American Samoa has a unique, isolated, and relatively undiversified economy and because the path to the full federal minimum
wage for this territory is a necessarily long one, Congress must be flexible over time with the minimum wage schedule in response to changing economic conditions. Congress must also maintain the clear requirement that the minimum wage in American Samoa be on a schedule to reach Mainland levels.” This American politician understood the specificities of American Sāmoa while also maintaining the desire to eventually raise wages in the region.

The Insular Areas Act also gave the Department of Energy the ability to monitor the stability of a toxic waste facility on Runit Island in the Marshall Islands, currently a sovereign nation subject to U.S. security and defense measures. The joining of military refuse and labor policies into one overall piece of legislation for liminal Pacific islands demonstrates how national security issues rank just as high, if not higher than labor topics for the U.S. federal government in colonized spaces of the Pacific in the twenty-first century. Since 9/11, Congress tightened authority over native-controlled immigration policies in the Northern Marianas “to assure proper border control in the post–September 11 security environment.” With the threat of North Korean nuclear testing near Guam in 2017, the historic and current strategic military and geopolitical positionality of these U.S.-controlled archipelagos also comes to light.

Delegate Faleomavaega stated that, “I take no happiness in the successful passage of this bill because I still stand for fair wages for American Samoa’s workers. . . . So between now and 2015, it will be up to the American Samoa government and our corporate partners, including StarKist and Tri-Marine, to find new ways of succeeding without further compromising the wages of our fish cleaners because I cannot promise that I will support any more delays after this.” Again, the tension between giving workers fair compensation and maintaining the main nongovernment industry in the islands surfaced in Faleomavaega’s comments. Local leaders are trying to find a balance between the needs on both sides of this issue in the colonially controlled and regulated space of American Sāmoa. Ultimately, these U.S. colonials have been and continue to be subject to the whims and desires of the U.S. Congress.

With the pay increase delays ending on September 30, 2015, Representative Amata introduced three different bills to address the minimum wage issue in American Sāmoa. One proposal would have allowed the American Sāmoa Government to make future decisions on pay hikes. The second proposal requested another delay to wage increases. The third bill stated any future pay increase decisions would be based on government reports that investigated the impact of raises on the region. Eventually legislation was amended and passed to reduce the annual American Sāmoan minimum wage increase from fifty cents to forty
cents. Georgia Senator Johnny Isakson pushed for this rate due to the larger political economic interests of his constituents.

After closing its operations in American Sāmoa in 2009, Chicken of the Sea moved the final step of its tuna processing procedure to Lyons, Georgia. At this location, Chicken of the Sea employed a much smaller number of skilled workers to operate high-tech canning machinery and still label their product as “Made in the USA.” Two hundred people in Georgia are paid fair wages to engage in the final stage of packaging fish. However, that same fish were initially cleaned and processed by low-wage workers in Southeast Asia, who are paid less than a dollar an hour, versus the total 2,147 former employees in American Sāmoa who previously took care of the entire process for below continental U.S. minimum wage. Consequently, politicians from Georgia have a strong motivation to continue the increases in American Sāmoa wage rates, keep tuna canning out of this Pacific region, and secure their state’s foothold in the final stage of fish processing for Chicken of the Sea.

According to Delegate Amata, “this new interest from the Georgia delegation translates to a tougher fight on any tuna canning issue in the future.” This statement was reinforced when, after the forty-cent increase was passed, a spokesperson for Senator Isakson said “the artificially lower wages in American Samoa—well below the federal minimum wage level of $7.25 per hour—provide employers in the territory a competitive advantage over Georgia job creators.”

Even though the Georgia senator succeeded in increasing the American Sāmoa minimum wage for the first time since 2008 to $5.16 an hour, his representative still focused on the unfair benefit that the lower wage rates provided for colonial laborers in this unincorporated Pacific region over continental workers. As seen in chapter 1, state politics related to U.S. citizen job protection within the fish industry came into play in Congressional actions in American Sāmoa. In the mid-1970s, the Fisheries Conservation and Management Act was primarily passed by Congress as a jobs bill. In the early twenty-first century, jobs for full-fledged U.S. citizens, not the needs and interests of U.S. colonial American Sāmoans, were a critical component to stateside debates over minimum wage hikes in this colonized Pacific region.

While Delegate Amata was glad that workers in American Sāmoa received a wage increase, she remained “concerned regarding the long-term stability of the canning industry on the island, as this increase, while welcomed for the people, will place an even greater strain on our local industry, which is already under attack from all sides.” In principle, Amata and others might back minimum wage increases. However, in practice most in the region understand that wage
hikes could ultimately push away the tuna industry and result in higher unemployment in American Sāmoa.

According to the American Sāmoa governor’s executive assistant Iulogologo Joseph Pereira, “the Governor walks a fine line in trying to strike a balance between the survival of the canneries and the survival of our people. We can’t give up the fight because our people’s lives are at stake.” Higher pay for workers is a positive. But such increases come with larger economic consequences for the fish industry in the region. This economic versus ethical dilemma directly stems from the liminal colonial status of American Sāmoans in relation to the U.S. government.

The continued debate and discussion over minimum wage in American Sāmoa has been compounded by the general push to raise the minimum wage in states of the union. In general, Republicans have not supported this move, while Democrats have spearheaded efforts for a living wage. In 2010, North Carolina Republican representative Patrick T. McHenry expressed how “we said this increase would be harmful in 2007, and the Democrats did it anyway... It proves our point that the federal government setting wage rates is destructive to job creation, whether it’s in American Samoa or western North Carolina.” The failure of minimum wage increases to improve the lives of Pacific Islanders in U.S. territories bolstered Republican rhetoric against higher pay, especially when Delegate Amata stated that “while well intended, the Fair Minimum Wage Standards Act has placed the economic well-being of American Sāmoa in great jeopardy.” The increase “would surely be the proverbial nail in the coffin for the local economy.” With U.S. colonial politicians themselves fighting against pay hikes, Republican efforts to block minimum wage increases on the continent were reinforced.

Overall, the application of national pay standards due to federal party politics since 2007 has had a generally detrimental effect on the local island economy. Since wage increases began in 2009, cannery employment has gone down by almost 50 percent. In reaction to the second forty-cent increase in two years, the Samoa Tuna Processors plant closed its canning operations on December 16, 2016, only eighteen months after opening and resulting in the loss of seven hundred jobs. In June 2017, Representative Amata proposed another bill in Congress to halt the next pay increase scheduled for the end of the year, keep minimum wage at $5.16, and revert back to the Special Industry Committee to make future wage hike decisions. Congress took no action on this bill and the next forty-cent wage increase occurred on September 30, 2018.
Online discussions continued among a handful of commentators about paying workers fairly, the failure of the local government to make change, as well as the fear of losing the fish industry.107 Cannery workers still expressed a desire for higher wages, but also did not want to risk losing their jobs.108 Common themes of local needs being ignored by the federal government and the burdens of this demanding fish industry on native peoples ran through all of these perspectives. Colonial status and control have historically and contemporarily subjected American Sāmoans to this wage labor quandary.

American Sāmoa leaders have also been consistently frustrated with the lack of consideration from U.S. politicians for the particularities of this unincorporated Pacific territory. Governor’s assistant Pereira stated in 2015 that the “expectations of our fears of economic gloom and doom have eventuated. We have been vociferous in our attempts to articulate over the years the consequences that will result if the competitive advantage of the two canneries was to be eroded.”109 Tri-Marine’s Hamby also stated that “if the voices of the American Samoan people aren’t being heard by NMFS regulators and policy makers in Washington, DC the future of American Samoan’s tuna dependent economy looks bleak.”110 All of these voices express anxiety over the liminal status of American Sāmoans in relation to U.S. programs, a direct impact of being regulated and controlled as U.S. colonials. At what point, if any, will or should the economic stability of American Sāmoa, or the wishes of the American Sāmoan people, take precedent over federal minimum wage hikes?

In the post–World War II era, this unincorporated territory of the United States transitioned from subsistence livelihoods to a cash-based economy focused on the single export of tuna and headed down a road of accommodating the corporate fish industry to make ends meet. Tuna canneries have historically threatened to leave in the face of pay increases. While two canneries have closed in the twenty-first century, one facility has been stable since the 1960s. In a global market where the canning of fish at the cheapest price and maintaining a major source of Gross Domestic Product matters more than paying humans a judicious wage, the demands and economic priorities of United States and world consumers and businesses take precedent over the welfare of cannery workers.

It is true that the cost of living in American Sāmoa is not as high as the United States. The same wage standards are not necessarily logical from an empirical perspective. However, some increases are reasonable. Issues of dependency on a single-market economy and U.S. federal funding, as well as federal party politics and corporate interests heavily influence the development of these policies in
the liminal economically colonized space of American Sāmoa. Therefore, the minimum wage issue, like many other local versus federal matters discussed in this book, is complicated and difficult to work through. Multiple indigenous and American perspectives exist as part of this bioregion, or totality of ecological and cultural relationships.

These often invisible strains of colonial rule, such as differential pay rates for cannery workers, are important and central policies in the lives of American Sāmoans, as well as those living in the continental United States and beyond. As long as American Sāmoa remains a colonized region of America, these questions are not going to disappear. Instead, such tensions must be discussed and dealt with in an open and direct way moving forward. The next chapter discusses another example of the complicated intersections of federal policies and native expectations of vā fealoaʻi through the creation and expansion of the National Marine Sanctuary of American Sāmoa. In all of these cases, historical and contemporary searches for appropriate and workable balances between and among indigenous and colonial relations occurs.