

# Report rocks global farmed shrimp sector



NO NAMES: The report on alleged worker abuses at shrimp plants in Thailand and Bangladesh doesn't name specific companies, causing some in the industry to say it unfairly tarnishes the entire sector. PHOTO: SOLIDARITY CENTER

A report from a union organization says many shrimp industry workers in Thailand and Bangladesh are abused, forced to work long hours for substandard pay.

BY BEN DIPIETRO

The report, "The True Cost of Shrimp," was prepared by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations' (AFL-CIO) American Center for International Labor Solidarity.

"While shrimp is now the most popular and widely traded seafood in the world, its rise in

popularity and profitability is shadowed by its social and environmental costs," the report said.

The center says it hopes the new report will show how the sale of low-cost shrimp is sustained through a staggering, largely hidden, cost to workers, their families and the environment.

"The true cost of shrimp is not what is seen on a supermarket price tag or a restaurant menu," said Ellie Larson, the center's executive director.

"Often, the factories' response to price pressure is to squeeze wages, neglect workplace health and safety regulations, and cut other corners that leave shrimp workers bearing the social cost of affordable shrimp," the report said.

## Workers struggle to survive

The report is based on interviews with workers at shrimp processing plants in Thailand and Bangladesh, the No. 1 and No. 9 exporters of shrimp to the United States.

"As both countries' shrimp industries have boomed and become integrated into a massive global shrimp supply chain, low wages, long hours, and unhealthy, hazardous work form the unfortunate foundation of work," said the report.

For example, in Bangladesh, some workers said they were paid as little as 1,200 taka (\$17.80/€11.20) a month, while in Thailand some workers received THB 400 baht (\$11.25/€7.08).

Workers say they are afraid to complain about their conditions for fear they will lose their jobs or be beaten.

"I make 2,000 taka (\$30/€18.87) a month. The rent for my room in Chittagong city, including electricity, comes to 1,500 taka a month," said one worker in Bangladesh. "This means I have only 500 taka (\$7.40/€4.65) to spend on food, clothes, and anything else."

A worker in Thailand told investigators fees paid to brokers who delivered the workers to the company would be taken from their pay, and they were made to work 18-hour days.

"They were beaten if they did not get up or if they were not on time for work," the worker said. "Between the three of them, they peeled around 110 pounds of shrimp a day and received a payment of 600 baht (\$17/€10.69) every 15 days."

There is little regard for safety, the workers said.

"None of the workers have gloves or boots or any safety equipment to protect us from injury, or waste, or pollution," one worker said. "Only when foreign buyers come to the fac-

tory are we issued boots and gloves, and as soon as they are gone, these are taken away again."

Workers who sought medical attention, missed work because they were sick or tried to escape the factory were dealt with severely.

"Workers said that if they made a mistake on the shrimp peeling line, asked for sick leave, or tried to escape, they could expect to be beaten, sexually molested, or publicly tortured," the report said.

## Importers, retailers named

Interviews conducted by Solidarity Center partner organizations identified 15 Thai factories in Samut Sakhon with substandard working conditions. All of these factories export some percentage of their products to the United States, the report said.

Importers buying from the 15 factories include Aqua Beauty/Charoen Pokphand Foods; Berdex Seafoods; Bumble Bee Seafoods; Daymon Worldwide Global Solutions; Eastern Fish Co.; H&N Foods Group/Expac Seafood; Mazzetta Co.; National Fish and Seafood Limited/Pacific Andes International; Ocean to Ocean/Icelandic USA; Pafco Importing Co.; RT Foods; Supervalu; and Tai Foong USA, the report said.

The Solidarity Center report identified nine supermarkets that sell these factories' processed shrimp: Costco; Cub Foods; Giant; Giant Eagle; Harris Teeter; IGA; Tops Markets; Trader Joe's; and Wal-Mart.

The shrimp are sold under the brand names Asian Classic; Bumble Bee; Captn's Pack; Camaron Beach; Chef; Condal; Cub Foods; Giant; Giant Eagle; Gulf Classic; Harris Teeter; IGA; Member's Mark; Northern King; Ocean Jewel; Orleans; Royal Thai; Sail; Sam's Club; Seamazz; Tiger Bay; TOPS; Trader Joe's; Yankee Clipper; and Wal-Mart.

Factories identified as having substandard labor practices or labor abuses were linked to their broader global supply chain partners by using the Port Import Export Reporting Service (PIERS) – a comprehensive database of import and export information on cargo moving through ports in the United States, Mexico, Latin America, and Asia, the report said.

## Certification issues

The report says guidelines and best practices established by the Aquaculture Certification Council (ACC) don't focus on labor issues and instead look at areas such as water quality and food safety.

Although the BAP guidelines acknowledge that workers should have safe working envi-

ronments and receive adequate compensation, they don't ensure these fundamental rights, the report said.

While facilities are generally exhorted to adhere to both national and international labor standards, they are evaluated only according to national and local minimums in the areas of wages, benefits, and child labor through data provided by the facility, not by an independent evaluator, it said.

"The ability of the ACC's certified inspectors to conduct serious evaluations of labor issues is in some doubt. Inspectors generally have a wealth of professional expertise in specialties like fisheries management and HACCP standards," the report said. "However, according to the ACC's website, none of them currently has specific expertise in labor law or ILO labor standards compliance."

The ACC said assertions its labor guidelines are "too weak" are simply not true and completely unsupported by facts.

## Allegations taken seriously

The National Fisheries Institute (NFI) says the allegations should be examined and offending companies punished.

"If there are bad actors in Thailand and Bangladesh, U.S. importers should reject them," said NFI President John Connelly. "If these accusations are valid, they stand in stark contrast to the code by which the U.S. seafood community operates. Let's hope that these accusation turn out to be incorrect."

The Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) says the report doesn't name specific details of which companies are involved – and if the group doesn't name names it needs to apologize to the industry.

Thai Union Frozen Products (TUF) sent a letter to its customers denying its shrimp processing plants in any way are involved with abuse of workers, and says the report smears the entire industry with allegations from one facility.

Icelandic USA Inc. says the report about abuse in shrimp factories incorrectly named it as the owner of a company that allegedly received product from processing facilities cited in the report. The center said it's looking into the company's claim.

Officials from several of the seafood companies named in the report – including PAFCO Importing Co. and Mazzetta Co. – dismissed the allegation.

"I am not an importer of frozen shrimp," said PAFCO President Terry Fitzgerald.

"I have not imported one pound of frozen shrimp – zero," he said.

