

Slavery “pervasive” in global seafood supply

By Gabriel Black
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Slaves are used to peel and process shrimp that finds its way in to many major supermarkets and shrimp companies around the world, according to an investigative report by the Associated Press (AP) published last week.

At Gig Peeling Factory in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, slaves work 16-hour days, waking up as early as 2 AM with the command, “Get up or get beaten.” Peeling shrimp in ice buckets, small children work alongside their parents, often crying, as their cold hands become numb in the troughs of shrimp.

The toilets overflow with feces. Workers work sick. According to the AP, “Some had been there for months, even years, getting little or no pay. Always, someone was watching.”

Tricked or forced into illegal migration, these workers, often from Myanmar, are slaves who are being worked quite literally to death to pay off impossible debts. Paid no more than a few dollars a day—at best—workers live locked-in in dormitories on-site and must pay bosses for their own gloves and equipment.

The following are a few anecdotes from AP’s investigation:

* “A woman eight months pregnant miscarried on the shed floor and was forced to keep peeling for four days while hemorrhaging.”

* “An unconscious toddler was refused medical care after falling about 12 feet onto a concrete floor.”

* “Another pregnant woman escaped only to be tracked down, yanked into a car by her hair and handcuffed to a fellow worker at the factory.”

Whole Foods, Dollar General, Wal-Mart, Kroger (Ralphs, Food 4 Less), Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Chicken of the Sea, Bumblebee, Petco and Fancy Feast, are just some of the companies whose supply-chain sources from slave-labor shrimp processing plants in Thailand that the AP was able to infiltrate.

The AP’s report is part of an ongoing investigation into slavery in Thailand’s seafood industry. According to the AP, “Pervasive human trafficking has helped turn Thailand into one of the world’s biggest shrimp providers.”

Earlier this year, in March, an AP reporting team infiltrated slave fish-trawlers off the coast of south-east Asia. Thousands of slaves, often smuggled in from Burma (Myanmar) or Thailand, were being forced to work against their will catching fish.

When not at sea enslaved workers are kept in cages at ports on small remote islands in Indonesia, including at the port of Benjina. They live on “a few bites of rice and curry a day in a space barely big enough to lie down.” Others were not so lucky and have been at sea for over a year, working non-stop, with cargo ships intercepting the trawlers to unload the catch.

According to a UN report, 60 percent of Burmese migrants in Thailand’s seafood processing industry “were victims of forced labor.”

AP’s investigation found that shrimp processed at Gig Peeling, the factory they infiltrated, ended up unloading at N&N Foods, Okeanos Food, Thai Union, Kongphop Frozen Foods and The Siam Union Frozen Foods—all of which are some of the world’s largest seafood suppliers. Thai Union, for instance, had net revenue of \$3.4 billion in 2014. Chicken of the Sea, John West, King Oscar, Petit Navire, Parmentier, Mareblu and Century are some of its major international brands that it owns.

Before publishing the story AP reached out to the various companies that were implicated in the “slavery tainted” supply chain. Spokespeople for Whole Foods told AP that they were “confident” they were not implicated in the chain. However, AP spoke to their Thai supplier, who admitted they did not know where the shrimp came from.

The CEO of Aqua Star told AP that “it’s disgusting

that it's even remotely part of my business.” The CEO of Thai Union said that he was “deeply disappointed that despite our best efforts we have discovered this potential instance of illegal labor practice in our supply chain.”

However, according to “a half-dozen former workers” from another shrimp slavery shed, a Thai Union employee visited the shed every day.

Companies may choose to crack down on the slavery in their supply chain, no doubt with the public's perception of them in mind. Earlier in the year AP's story about slavery in the fishing industry in Thailand led to the rescue of several thousand slaves.

However, undergirding the prevalence of slavery is not some collection of inhumane business owners that need to be shamed into line. At root are economic pressures to produce shrimp at the absolute cheapest price by brutally exploiting the workforce.

The global fish industry, similar to the global electronics industry, outsources production to intermediate suppliers, who themselves may sub-contract to hundreds of smaller companies.

Driving this competitive pyramid is cost; the sub-contracted sweat-shops are all competing against each other, and must out-do each other somehow. However, there is no technical advantage they can wield. At the end of the day the only way they can improve their bottom line is by keeping wages as low as possible. Especially in times of global economic stagnation, driving workers into conditions of slavery is the most competitive thing these sub-contractor companies can do.

It must also be asked, should these slaves be transferred to less slave-like conditions, what would that exactly mean? Workers making electronics at Foxconn routinely work 14 hour days making only \$22 a day. What exactly distinguishes this life of ostensibly free labor from that of the shrimp-workers, who are beaten when they try to escape?

If Foxconn employees stop working, they too are forced to return to work, not by brute force, but because they need to eat and somehow find a way to live. Both the factory workers and the shrimp peelers are subjected to lives of virtual slavery, one enforced by violence, the other by their own needs.

In conditions of growing economic inequality and worsening global economic crisis, the pressure on

companies to cut costs and find cheaper suppliers grows. Stories uncovered by AP will not go away with a dash of good will and public outcry. They are the logical result of an economic system, capitalism, whose source of profit comes from grinding workers down to the bone.

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