Mexico's Squid Sweatshops

By Virginia Sole-Smith
Photos by Emmanuel Ruiz

It was a little after eight in the evening, and the sun was just beginning to set over the Gulf of California. Our small motorboat, known here in Santa Rosalia, Mexico, as a *panga*, sped out over the shimmering water. The breezy sea air felt good and clean after the heat of the day, and soon Delmar, the twenty-six-year-old squid fisherman who had agreed to take us out for his night's work, was cracking open cans of Tecate with my Mexican translator, Emmanuel Ruiz.

When we reached Delmar's fishing spot, he cut the engine and flipped on the rusty battery pack that powers a tiny light bulb duct-taped to a pole on the middle bench of the panga. Floating all around us were dozens of other pangas, and as night fell, the dots of light twinkled like a hundred fallen stars. Occasionally we heard other fishermen, known as *pescadores*, from surrounding pangas singing or laughing. It was beautiful and peaceful.

Then we began to fish.

Delmar, wearing chest-high orange waders over a faded blue T-shirt, unraveled a glow-in-the-dark plastic tube fitted with sharp metal hooks that is attached

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to a thousand feet of clear fishing line. He tossed it overboard, wrapping the other end around a piece of scrap wood. When the line went tight after a few minutes, he began to pull, bare hand over bare hand, hauling the line back up through hundreds of feet of water. Seconds later, a forty-pound Humboldt squid splashed up from the depths with an enormous spray of salt water and sticky, black ink. From tentacles to tail, it was almost as long as the panga is wide. I understood why the pescadores call the giant red squid Diablo Rojo (Red Devil).

In one fluid movement, Delmar yanked the squid out of the water and slapped it down on the wooden plank he used as a table. It snorted, flopped, and sprayed ink, arms wriggling. Delmar donned an already soaked pair of gardening gloves, grabbed a rusty machete, and neatly chopped off the squid's head. Then he sliced open its body, ripping out the squid's entrails, brain, beak, and still-blinking yellow eyeball and throwing them overboard, before tossing the head and body into the separate wells made by the panga's benches.

Four hours of nonstop hauling, spraying, and slicing later, the piles of red squid bodies and heads had grown so large that we had to balance with our feet braced awkwardly against the slippery benches. When we had to move around the boat, we'd slip on spare eyeballs and black slime, and occasionally a spastic tentacle would wrap itself around the odd ankle. Everything we wore was soaked with salt water and squid guts, and the air turned cold.

There were no life vests, radios, or emergency lights on board Delmar's panga. Every season, at least two or three fishermen die at sea, from accidents, drug overdoses, or a heart attack that sets in before a pescadoro can return to shore.

"We know each other, but when we're fishing, we aren't friends, we're competitors," Delmar says of the other fishermen, most of whom have been at it since they were thirteen. "Nobody will tell you when they find a good fishing spot, or even help you if your boat capsizes. The work is too hard."

These grotesque working conditions are just the beginning of problems for the people of Santa Rosalia, a town of around 10,000 that is located in Baja California Sur, a long day's drive from Tijuana. When Hurricane Jimena swept through last September, entire neighborhoods were destroyed, leaving many families homeless. Though the Baja peninsula is a mecca for tourists, few of them stay in Santa Rosalia for long. There are no spring break parties here. Not one of the few motels or cafes has a credit card machine. The small beach has black sand, thanks to run-off from a now-defunct copper mine, and is littered with old tires and other trash. The rest of the waterfront is devoted to three squid factories and the panga docks, because fishing the ten million Humboldt squid swimming in twenty-five square miles of Santa Rosalia's waters is the only game in town.

The squid processing plants consist of Korean-owned Brumar de San Bruno, Korean-owned Hanjin Mexico, and Chinese-owned Pesquera de Longing, SA. These factories buy each day's catch from middlemen known as *permissionarios*, who have frozen the price the fishermen receive for their squid at just two pesos per kilo. That means most consider a $50 paycheck for a ten-hour fishing trip to be a good night. And it is, compared to what their wives, mothers, and daughters make working in the

Squid processors demonstrate for their rights.

plants themselves, where things are even worse.

When you hear about Mexican sweatshops, it's usually the garment factories and auto assembly plants that crowd the Mexico/United States border that come to mind. But as those plants have received greater scrutiny in recent years, the problems have crept deeper. By offering foreign investors both a sought-after natural resource and a captive, impoverished workforce, Santa Rosalia has become home to a new kind of maquiladora zone, which is popping up in similarly remote corners all over Mexico. The squid sweatshops operate Wild West-style, far from the federal labor offices in Mexico City. But it isn't just lack of local law enforcement that's to blame. Globalization and the United States' lack of regulation over seafood imports are also responsible for the exploitation here.

Rosa Ceseña Ramirez, now forty-five, began working in the first processing plant to open in Santa Rosalia in 1994. By 2002, she was sick of spending anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours per night in the Hanjin Mexico factory. She never knew how long a shift would last because the women often wait deep into the night for the first of the day's catch to arrive, but aren't paid for that time.

"You can either drink coffee for hours to stay awake, or sleep on the factory floor like an animal," Rosa explains. "Once the squid arrives, we have to work until it's all processed, even if it takes until the next afternoon. Then we would go home for a few hours to sleep and see our kids, and have to come right back that evening."

The breaking point for Rosa came in November 2002, when Hanjin Mexico allegedly failed to pay its workers a federally mandated annual bonus, after allegedly frequently shortchanging their weekly paychecks. Rosa gathered more than fifty signatures and filed a complaint with the Santa Rosalia labor office. Hanjin Mexico responded by firing Rosa and more than ninety other workers, she says.

Almost eight years later, the former Hanjin Mexico workers are still waiting for the labor office to resolve their dispute, and conditions at all three Santa Rosalia factories have

worsened. At the neighboring Pesquera de Longing, SA, workers report that there are only two toilets available for more than eighty workers.

"We never have any toilet paper and the bathrooms are only cleaned once a week," says Ana Talamantes, who has been there since being fired from Hanjin. "We also aren't given any clean drinking water and workers who live in the plant sleep on beds made out of two plastic crates with a piece of wood on top."

Even worse are the reports from Brumar de San Bruno, which is the most isolated of the three, situated a half hour drive from Santa Rosalia, down a dirt road surrounded by a stretch of desert that has been carpeted with beer cans, used diapers, and other trash. Most of the seventy workers there are migrant laborers who come from other Mexican states and live at the plant in a long, barracks-style dorm. The day after our squid-fishing trip, Ruiz got a call from Sonia Sanchez, a worker in her midthirties who lived at the plant but found a free hour to sneak away and meet us for an interview. We picked her up by the San Bruno beach, and Ruiz instructed me not to ask any questions until we could be sure there weren't any factory supervisors around.

"There are six of us sleeping in one room and whenever it's time to go back to work, the Koreans just open the door and yell, 'Let's go,' " Sonia said. "They don't care if you're undressed or sleeping. We're treated like slaves."

Many of the workers are single mothers who bring their children to

live at the plant. Sonia introduced us to B., a pretty sixteen-year-old girl with long dark hair and pink earrings. She looked terrified when I asked her name (not used for her protection), but admitted that she had worked at Brumar since she was thir-

teen, alongside her younger brother and several other children, some as young as ten. "We weigh the squid after the women clean it," B. explained. "I start work at 11:00 p.m. and make fifteen pesos [about $1.50] per hour. I go to school too, but some of the other kids don't." That's because the workers have no way to get them there, and because they say that shifts usually last sixteen hours, extending well into the normal school day. To stay awake for such long stretches, many workers turn to crystal meth and cocaine.

"They do drugs in front of the children," said Sonia, shaking her head.

The owners of the Santa Rosalia factories vehemently deny all of their workers' complaints. Jimmy Yoon worked as a reporter for a Korean newspaper in Los Angeles before taking over the operation of Brumar de San Bruno from his father, and still commutes between Mexico and the United States, spending one week a month at home with his family in Orange County. On the day we visited Brumar, he wore sport sandals, shorts, and a baseball cap, looking like an American tourist down for some Baja sport fishing. He greeted us affably, especially once he recognized my Korean translator, Danny Park, executive director of Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance in Los Angeles. Yoon made no bones about his problems running a Mexican factory.

"More than 30 percent of my workers have drug problems, and also at least 30 percent can't write their own name. They don't bother to send their kids to school, and they lie to me about how old they are so they can make them work," Yoon said in English, occasionally lapsing into Spanish or Korean. "The number one problem in Mexico is the people." When asked about the workers' complaints about mistreatment and long hours, he became emotional. "If I really treat the workers like animals, why are they returning to me every year?" he asked. A few weeks later, I received an e-mail from Yoon: "Please be cool when you deal with the problems of Santa Rosalia. . . . There are soooo many lies."

After half an hour of drinking tea and chatting about how much he missed his children, Yoon agreed to give us a tour of the plant. "All air conditioned with cable television," he boasted as we passed the workers' dorm. "Though I'm thinking seriously about getting rid of cable because it's so expensive." Two small boys sat out front, both barefoot, one clutching a naked Barbie doll.

The main factory floor was a din of clattering boxes and constantly spraying water. Every surface was soaked. Women in rubber boots and shower caps stood at long metal tables, slicing piles of squid. Most worked too quickly to spare us a second look. Yoon told us that the workday is eight hours and he provides all of the workers' meals for free. Behind him, in a dark corner of the warehouse, we saw a Korean supervisor furtively nudging several young-looking boys into a back room.

The management at Hanjin Mexico, where workers have made the most vocal attempts to organize, echoed Yoon's sentiments. "There are a lot of Mexican workers who just want easy money, they don't want to work," said Etelvina Carbajal, the general administrator. "Koreans talk really fast and loud and the workers don't understand; they think the boss is being mean and make a complaint. But mostly people are happy to work here." When I asked about Rosa's case against Hanjin from 2002, Carbajal's perfectly tweezed brows furrowed. "That woman was a liar."

The owner of Hanjin, Kwang Pyo-Lee, is based out of Hanjin's Los Angeles headquarters and did not return calls for comment.

Enlace International, a coalition of unions and worker centers in Mexico and the United States, is now approaching year eight of a campaign to create better working conditions for Santa Rosalia's

squid fishermen and the women who work in the local processing plants.

"What's happening in Santa Rosalia is all the more shocking because it's such a throwback," says Maria Lorena Cook of Cornell University.

"It's like federal worker laws don't exist in these factories," says Jose Manuel Murillo, the municipal president (Mexico's equivalent of a mayor). "We respect all the positions, but we need to support these workers and our fishermen." When I asked for specifics, he sighed. "All of the labor rights are under the federal government, so it's not our jurisdiction, but I would like to help the workers." (Two months after I spoke with him, Rosa led a group of fifteen workers to present their case to Murillo's office, but he refused to meet with them.)

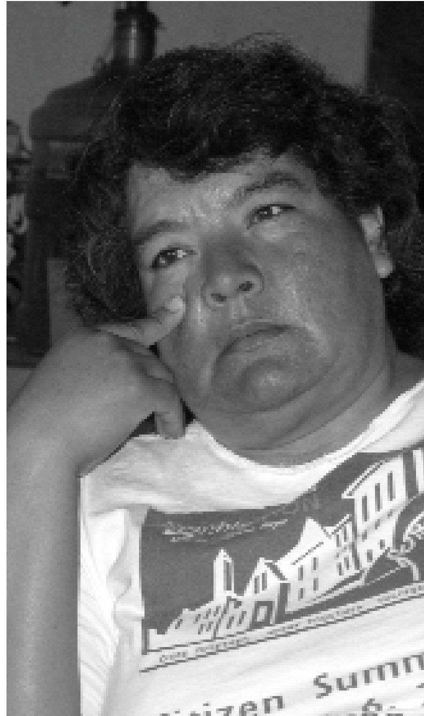
"In some cases, the local government really doesn't have the authority; in others we've heard that they're acting on a clear message from Mexico City not to intervene," says Cook. "The municipal government's biggest fear is that the factories will simply pick up and move at the first sign of a union."

"There will never be any enforcement of the labor laws in Mexico because this is a country with $212 billion in foreign debts," says Garrett Brown, the coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network. "Anything that discourages foreign investment is economic suicide and a political impossibility. If Americans want to help these workers, getting our government and banks to forgive Mexico's debt would be a big first step."

Another big step would be to tighten U.S. regulation of imported seafood.

"Seafood is often shipped from port to port before it reaches the United States, and it can be relabeled upon entry and exit, so we have no way of telling where it originally came from," explains Patrick Woodall of Food and Water Watch, a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. "Globalization has impacted processed seafood the same way it has auto parts. Companies can catch squid in Mexico, then ship it back to China for processing so they can take advantage of even cheaper labor markets and lower food safety regulations, then send it back to the United States."

Any single processing plant in China purchases squid and other raw materials from a huge number of sources all around the world, mixing them all together into imitation crab meat, fish sticks, or dried squid snacks. Country of Origin Labeling is required only on fresh seafood, not products like these. "There's just no way to trace it all," Woodall says.



"Once the squid arrives, we have to work until it's all processed, even if it takes until the next afternoon," says Rosa Ceseña Ramirez.

Without federally mandated transparency in the supply chain, seafood importers in the United States can easily hide ties to the Santa Rosalia squid fishery. Since most buy their seafood from middlemen in China, Japan, or Korea, they may not even know the true origins of their products. And the factories in Santa Rosalia can protect their customers, who wouldn't want to be associated with sweatshops that withhold wages from a doped-up, under-age workforce.

Enlace researchers found Hanjin dried squid, along with the company's lines of Korean snack foods, noodles, chili powder, rice, and beans in numerous Korean supermarkets throughout Los Angeles and Chicago. (Five store chains agreed to stop selling Hanjin products once they learned of the squid workers' struggle.)

All told, imports of processed squid from China have skyrocketed in recent years, from almost none in 1998 to more than 1.1 million pounds in 2009 (along with 120 million pounds of unprocessed squid), according to USDA data. But figuring out which of these U.S. retailers to hold accountable for the dire conditions in Santa Rosalia is all but impossible as long as our seafood supply is so difficult to trace.

Meanwhile in Santa Rosalia, Rosa balances her day job at a local supermarket with trying to fundraise as secretary general of SINTIM, the local union hoping to organize both the fishermen and factory workers with Enlace's support. She holds meetings for interested workers in the playground of the local school and writes letter after letter to officials in the municipal, state, and federal governments, as well as the local newspapers, the Catholic Church, and the Korean Consulate in Mexico City. The process is slow, and every day, more workers suffer. But Rosa is not deterred, even after Hurricane Jimena destroyed three of the four rooms in her tiny house.

"We know that one day it will be our daughters working in those factories," she says. "One part of my heart is sad for all the bad things that have happened. But the other part of my heart is happy because I know we are supporting one another." ◆