Justice & Health

An American Who Managed a Shrimp Processing Plant in India Files a Whistleblower Complaint With U.S. Authorities

Joshua Partlowski took his dream job in India. What he found was something else entirely.

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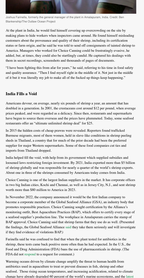
On October 25, 2021, a 40-year-old American named Joshua Partlowski flew into the city of Aurangabad near India's eastern coast to start his new job at the general manager at a shrimp processing plant. He was excited about the job, which was his first time in a managerial board seat that allowed him to use his business degree and experience abroad for the first time. Time, this would be a high pressure job, and he would cross Clarion, the only, but he had negotiated a salary of $150,000 a year, more than double what he'd earned at another seafood company in the United States. He jokes that he was the best that great company had ever had, and he was ready to prove it. He had been married for a year, and his wife was excited to be with him and to be on the job. He looked forward to signing the company's car, paying off his car loan and setting aside some money for his employer's retirement plan.

Partlowski was joining a very high-tech company with the great vision to drive sustainable of Aurangabad, and was nationally by two publishes and crucial seven. Security guards guarded the premises, and an automatic sprinkler system ensured the shrimp stayed cool. Workers in sanitary gowns shrimp, cuttlefish or nearby ponds, were beheaded, deveined, peeled, cooked, and packaged for export to Europe and the United States. The plant was a hub for a large company whose shrimp, cuttlefish and other seafood products were sold in Walmart, Price Chopper, Metcalfe's and Hannaford with a little over 35 million pounds of seafood sold annually. Clarion's parent company, Avanti Aquaculture, operates shrimp farms and feeding into the allegations. Avanti Aquaculture and Avanti Feeds are an integrated operation for consumer.)

Before he arrived at work, Partlowski was struck by the number of workers streaming through the gate. It reminded him of an airport terminal, through these always seemed to be some delays and lines. Once he was in the plant, he was impressed by the scale of the operation. It was organized in processes dotting on the operation floor, and it was divided into "pods" – a group of 40 shipping containers or over 600 sets each month. He was given, then, might be more accurate than the other managers, who had been with the company for years. Partlowski worked locally in Andhra Pradesh and they were better at the end of each day. The were more engaged workers who lived at the plant and they arrived at the harbours of the Bay of Bengal. Clarion's plant was in the city of Aurangabad, which is known for its rocky, dry, and the plant. The company made sure workers had a place to live, and they recruited workers recruited from experienced centers of the country such as West Bengal. Many came from the forest and caste and tribe. Clarion. They slept in accommodations on site in metal bunk beds. A security guard was usually posted outside near the building's front door.



Joshua Partlowski, left, and his colleagues at the plant in Aurangabad, India. Image: Jaime Cowley/Inside Climate News

At the plant in India, he would find himself covering up overcrowding on the site by shipping workers to other plants, inspections cause another of the Clarion's Facilities, cutting its supply chain complied with regulations, Indian screening to for who lived in. He was shocked by the number of workers who were underage, and he was shocked by the number of Partlowski, who was raised in a Mormon family and had served a two-year mission in Brazil and a social security worker, had gone off the rails as a young man, living on the street and addicted to methamphetamine. Partlowski felt that he had been given a second chance, and he was determined to make the most of it. Partlowski, he stopped talking to his parents after they disapproved of him marrying a black woman.

Joshua Partlowski, left, and his colleagues at the plant in Aurangabad, India. Image: Jaime Cowley/Inside Climate News

India Fits a Void

Americans devour, on average, nearly six pounds of shrimp a year, an amount that has doubled in a generation. In 2001, the consumption over doubled 92 percent, whole shrimp and shrimp products, mostly from Asia. Shrimp farms in Asia have been accused of destroying local ecosystems and the people who depend on them. Some farms use antibiotics and pesticides, sometimes after an "enhanced substantial shrimp farm."

away. BAP and other certifications forbid the use of off-site peeling sheds because they are tougher to regulate. The CAL report says that "peeling sheds are often hidden and rarely audited." The two sheds that Choice Canning used processed 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of shrimp per day – roughly half the quantity that the company shipped to America, according to Farinella and from dozens of daily production reports. (The company has since said that none of the shrimp processed in these sheds was for BAP customers. It did not specify where this shrimp was sold.)

The plant in Amalapuram, India, had some of its shrimp processed in an off-site peeling shed in Kundaleswaram that labor researchers say are tougher to monitor for workforce standards. Credit: Joshua Farinella/The Outlaw Ocean Project

Throughout his time at the plant, Farinella received a relentless stream of messages from the senior leadership. JT, the chief executive, often seemed incensed at hygiene shortcomings. "Get this cold store mess solved at the earliest," he wrote in a WhatsApp message. "Whoever did this will suffer in life!". One day, after being shown a photo of the site in good order, he said that he had just been told that $80,000 worth of his produce had to be thrown away because American customers complained about the smell. "How do I believe your photos?" he wrote on WhatsApp to his staff on-site. But Farinella also felt stonewalled when he tried to make improvements. "When I would tell JT what changes I needed to make I would be flat out told 'no'."

Farinella was also under constant pressure for not generating enough revenue. In a recorded Zoom meeting on February 6, 2024, between Farinella and three executives, including JT, the leaders expressed frustration with Farinella for being insufficiently productive, using what Farinella described as the "usual veiled threat of firing." "I don't know what your January results are," said JT. "You should be more concerned than I am."

A Formal Complaint With the FDA

In January, Farinella finally decided to go public with what he knew about the plant and contacted a journalist. "I think it is likely that I was hired not to manage the facility, but to be the American face that provides the appearance of legitimacy," he said. For a plant with so many problems, he added, "I'm afraid I can't be that face."

A videographer travelled to India to document conditions at the plant. Farinella was so on edge that when he saw armed police near his apartment building he felt his heart was almost "jumping out" of his chest. (It turned out to be a coincidence.)

A few days later Farinella caught a plane back to America and emailed his notice from the airport. After landing in Pennsylvania, he stopped by McDonald's on his way home from the airport. "I don't even like McDonald's," Farinella said. "But that was a damn good cheeseburger that day."

Pressure was starting to wear on Farinella's colleagues, too. On February 14, 2024, a human resources officer from the plant contacted Farinella on WhatsApp to say that he, too, was quitting Choice Canning. The hours were ruining his marriage, he said, and the dispute with local workers over wages had wrecked his reputation. He was being threatened on the phone. "While I was going home in my car," he later wrote in WhatsApp to Farinella, "some of the local people attacked me with stones."

Farinella retained a lawyer in America and filed a formal whistleblower complaint to the FDA and several other federal agencies. He wasn't sure what good it might do, but he wanted to state what he had seen on the record.

The same day, Aldi South's auditors arrived to Amalapuram. They were there to conduct the inspections that the local managers had been discussing for weeks. After the audit was finished that evening, Farinella contacted his former colleagues and asked whether they had gone ahead and relocated workers during the audit. Two of the managers confirmed that they had indeed. "Exactly sir," one wrote in WhatApp. "All workers are sent outside."

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