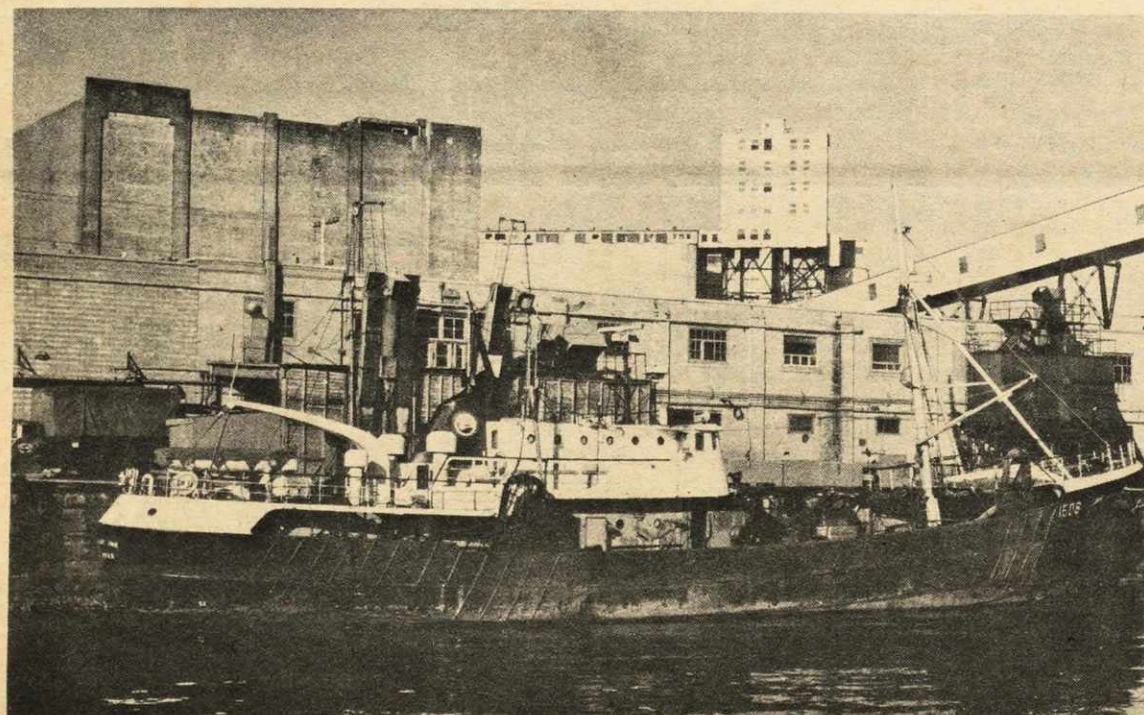


Fish for my price... or don't fish at all

Rick Williams teaches at the Maritime School of Social Work. In this article he examines why the Atlantic Provinces fishing industry has remained underdeveloped and discusses the measures that inshore fishermen are taking to bring stability and security to their lives.

In a small fishing village in eastern Nova Scotia there is a fish plant that has operated in the ownership of one family for three generations. It no longer processes fish — it is just a location to buy from local inshore fishermen and to trans-ship to other plants. The former owner is now the manager of the plant. He is just a fish buyer. The whole operation was purchased a few years ago by H.B. Nickerson Ltd. of North Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Two years ago the fishermen became aware that their buyer was paying 15¢ a pound for codfish (their principal product in the summer and fall months) while other buyers in other locations were paying upwards of 18¢. The fishermen held meetings to develop a common stand, and then presented demands for a higher price to the fish buyer. They met with an adamant refusal. The buyer said that he could not pay a higher price because his own margins were so thin that he would be forced



out of business. This was a very serious threat because, without a local buyer for their products, it appeared doubtful the community could survive.

Some of the fishermen continued to push the issue. They found another plant some 60 miles to the west that would send a truck over to buy at a price that was higher than the local buyer. But the fishermen were divided. Some were afraid to undercut the local buyer because, regardless of his low prices, he provided a dependable market for all of their products — lobster, herring, mackerel, haddock, and so on. There was no guarantee that the outside company would keep coming back, or that it would pay good prices for other products. The fishermen knew they had neither time nor resources to continually find new buyers. Many of the fishermen had obtained credit from the local buyer to gear up at the beginning of the season, in return for which they had promised to sell all their products to him. Still others were reluctant to go against a man who was part of their community and whom they had dealt with on a highly personalized basis all their lives.

But still the more militant fishermen persisted. They began to sell to the outside buyer. Even more importantly, they began to participate in a drive by fishermen throughout the

county to organize a local of the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU). In spite of all the dependency on the fish buyer and his constant threats to close out rather than bargain the price of fish, there was widespread interest in the union and open debate among the fishermen as to its merits.

Little can happen in such a small and isolated community that is not observed and

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remarked upon by its inhabitants. It was therefore common knowledge when the fish buyer made a trip to North Sydney, and the word got around very quickly when the next day he began to pay two more cents a pound for codfish. This was an increase which did not bring them up to general standards for the industry, but which undercut the advantage of selling to the outside buyer.

Resistance to the buyer was broken, and gradually all of the fishermen drifted back to

production in the Atlantic Region during recession. In the process some accumulate enough savings to get loans to buy large, well-equipped and highly productive inshore boats. Their effective use of long-lining and dragging techniques, of radar, sonar, depth finders, Loran navigation equipment and ship-to-shore radio, distinguish them radically from the hook and line methods still being widely used by the

previous generation of fishermen and by their less aggressive contemporaries. It is these younger fishermen who have been away, have had industrial experience and have chosen inshore fishing as a way of life who tend to be the real organizational base for the unionization drive. They can see through the tactics of the buyer, and know he has kept their fathers and grandfathers enslaved in the "fish for my price or don't fish at all" trap. They have been in unions and have experienced the power to force employers to negotiate the conditions of exploitation. They believe therefore that unionization is the best and perhaps only way to alter the economic and political dominance of the big companies.

But these militant young fishermen are still a minority, albeit a large and vocal one. They can fight hard, but there is a certain line beyond which they cannot go for fear of generating real discord within their own communities. Inshore fishing communities are small and isolated because the resource base itself is distributed unevenly, and because it will only support a given number of producers in each area. The fishermen in a particular village share the adjacent grounds in common and are highly interdependent in their day to day work. They teach each other how to fish and where to fish, and share a constant flow of knowledge and information about the complex climatic and geographic conditions that determine where fish will be and whether they can be caught. The community contains its own search and rescue facilities, and pools labour for common tasks like boat launching, haul-outs, wharf building, and so on. Consequently if an individual is ostracized by the community he simply cannot fish there. If there is significant division between groups of fishermen, the productivity and social viability of the community as a whole is threatened. Contrary to popular images about independence and individuality, the inshore industry is a highly socialized and interdependent mode of production.

But given this, it is also the case that there can be a wide range of incomes among fisher-

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men in one community, and they fish different types of gear which are often competing for the same fish. When fish are scarce as a result of over-fishing, or when markets are poor, there can be intense competition between fishermen for catches and for sales. For the same reasons, there can be great indifference to the problems of fishermen in other communities nearby or throughout the industry. The inshore industry is a complex interaction of competition and cooperation, of localism and solidarity. Superficial perceptions of the often more visible differences and anarchistic tendencies

have led to the characterization of inshore fishermen as "unorganizable".

For these reasons, fishermen who favour union in the community I have described insist that you cannot have a union until all or nearly all the fishermen want it. Unity is not just a value to them, it is a practical necessity. Disunity might gain them a few cents on their fish, but it will undermine their production process and threaten their social and cultural viability of their isolated village.

The fish merchant families, the Nickersons, the Smiths, the Coors, the Morrows, the Melansons, and others all know this too. They have lived in and off of those same communities for generations. That is why Nickerson kept the boats manager and kept the name of the plant unchanged. Fishermen might more easily take against an outside company which is an owner of the big off-shore draggers which are invading and raking clean their traditional fishing grounds, and which are stripping the fish stocks before they ever come inshore.

Perhaps the most crucial point is that Nickerson did not close the plant even though it might appear that the inshore fishermen were in competition with their own off-shore boats. Through purchases of small local plants like this one all over the province, the big companies have gained total dominance over the inshore industry. They do not use this power to dramatically reduce the numbers of fishermen who they deem are backward, marginal and redundant.

Until the spring of '77, H.B. Nickerson Ltd. was the second biggest fish company in the region, but was still much smaller than Number One — National Sea Products Ltd. But in a complex and little understood series of intercorporate moves, Nickerson gained controlling shares in National Sea. It is generally suspected that Geo. Weston Ltd. is really the power and the money behind all this. Nevertheless it is the case that the two biggest producers, processors, and marketers of fish in the Atlantic region are one company. Together they control the industry including very substantial options in ship-building, fishing supplies, vessel insurance and credit services for fishermen.

We must still ask: such a vast and modern corporation both to colonize a little fish plant which buys from less than two dozen fishermen. And why they go to so much trouble to earn about half-cent on the relatively small catch of fish in this village?

The first and most obvious answer is that they need to control resource base and the labour supply to keep real or potential competitors. Secondly, they have the same relationships with small plants and little villages throughout the region and after a while all those petty profits do add up. The fish companies are stilling in a mercantilist culture — you pay little for it as possible when you buy it, and you charge as much as you can when you sell.

These motives are important, but there is another which is most crucial. The companies catch their fish with their off-shore dragger (or trawler) fleets, but what they catch is mostly dog food or chicken food. Unfortunately however, much of what they catch

marketing of these products outside of the region. When they are exported, they are sold as luxury items at prohibitive prices. Much of the inshore groundfish catch (cod and haddock) that is purchased by the big companies is mixed in with their off-shore catch to upgrade its quality. But it is the relatively low grade and high prices of the fish products put on American and central Canadian markets by the big companies that accounts in large part for the low consumer demand for fish foods from this region.

What we are describing can be best termed a classic case of underdevelopment. A peculiar and unique combination of geographical and climatic factors makes the oceans immediately surrounding the Atlantic Provinces the richest and most varied fishing resource base in the world. Since the early 17th century mercantilist companies have been exploiting the resource as vigorously as their technologies would permit them. But in the period since the Second World War immense investment has been made in new methods of harvesting the fishery. The Russians, Poles, West Germans, Japanese, Cubans and others have invested literally billions in huge fleets of all-weather draggers, factory ships, research vessels and supply ships specifically to fish the Grand Banks and the adjacent grounds. The declaration by Canada of a 200 mile protected zone in January 1977 established effective control of the resource base at a point where it had been

over-exploited to a critical degree. These are two aspects of underdevelopment: foreign dominance and extraction of primary resources, and the perhaps permanent distortion of the productivity of the resource base.

While foreigners were using and abusing the fishery, where were the Canadian capitalists who could take advantage of their easy access to the grounds to gain dominance over international markets? They were years behind in investing in the fishing industry and in new methods of production, apparently content to live off the exploitation of impoverished in-

It goes without saying that most of this money will come from outside Canada. The dominant fish companies in the region will promote further over-exploitation of the resource and continued foreign dominance. This behaviour is another basic aspect of underdevelopment.

And finally, there is the poverty and social marginality of the great majority of workers in the industry — seasonal and unskilled plant workers, crew members on the off-shore boats, and inshore fishermen. As well as being highly productive and highly exploited themselves, the latter constitute with their families the

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shore fishermen. The federal government pushed small companies together into big ones, and then pushed them and capitalized them to build dragger fleets and modern processing plants. But still today, with virtual monopoly control over the resource base, the companies in this region prefer a *comprador* role. They are promoting (together with the Nova Scotia and Newfoundland governments) "joint ventures" with foreign companies and some \$900 million investment in fleet building.

population base from which labour for other sectors of the industry are drawn.

To make any substantial improvement in their incomes, job security, and the stability of their way of life, workers in the industry must confront the realities of underdevelopment. There must be major conservation efforts to protect endangered stocks and bring them back to levels that will support the overall industry in future. There must be considerable development of ecologically sound and economically viable fishing technologies, particularly in the off-shore industry. There must be substantial development of markets and of the facilities to get high quality and reasonably priced products to consumers in Europe and central North America.

All of these changes in concert represent the real development of the industry, and all require investment of massive surpluses that historically have been drained out of the industry and out of the region. Capitalists in the industry and in the region have demonstrated clearly that they, like the foreign fish companies, have no real commitment to the balanced and long term development of the industry.

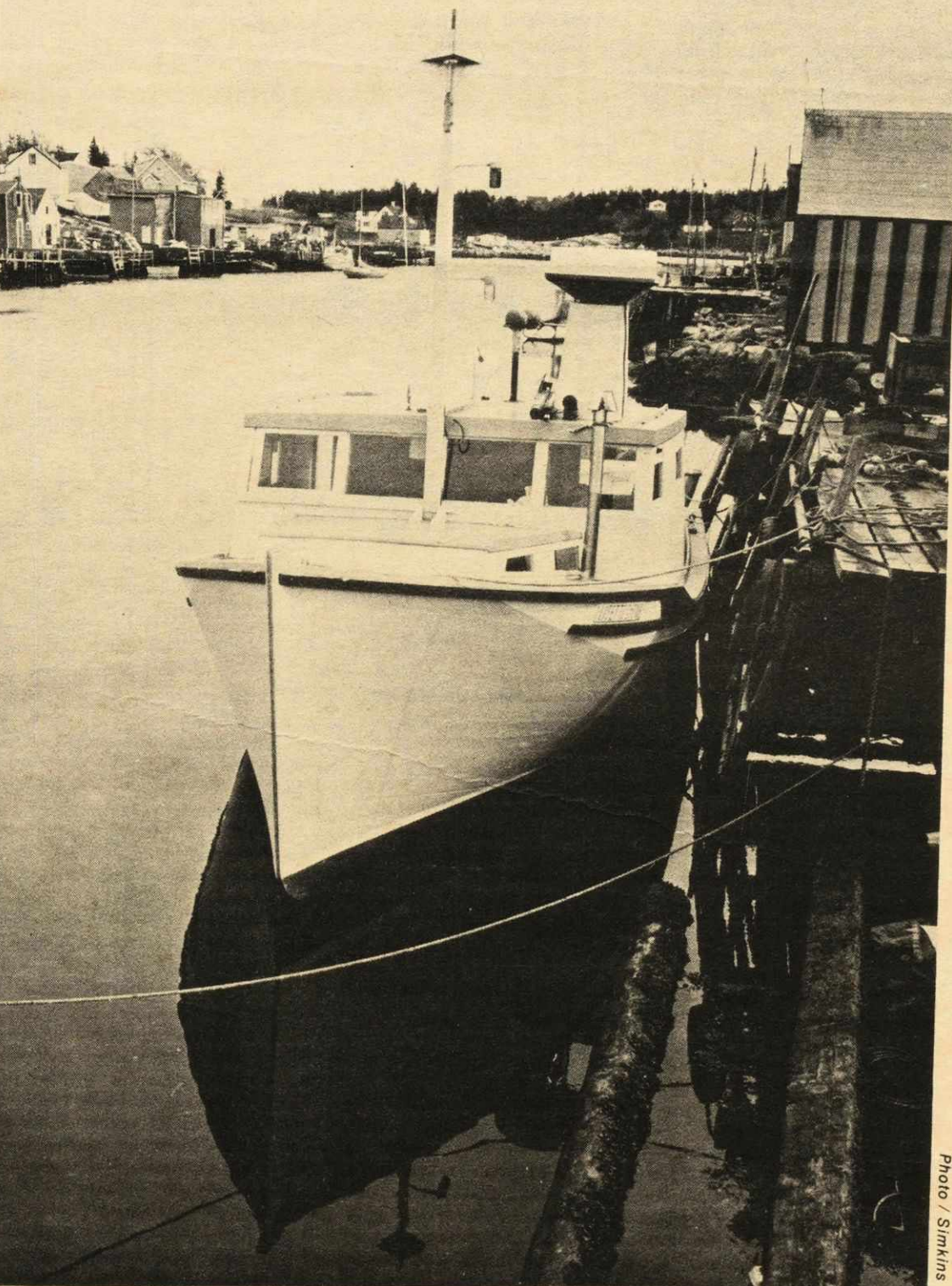
This brings us back to the Maritime Fishermen's Union. It is an organization only of inshore fishermen, but it has been developing solid links with plant workers and off-shore crews. It began among Acadian fishermen in New Brunswick, and was a part of the struggle for community and cultural survival among the Acadians. But as the organization matured, the fishermen realized that the industry was structured on a regional basis, and that effective struggle either for economic goals or for policy changes required solidarity among all inshore fishermen. The companies constantly play off one area against another, and the government has its favourite individuals and puppet organizations whom it "consults" on policy matters.

The MFU had its founding meeting in February of 1977 with a signed-up membership of nearly 900 boat owners and crew in New Brunswick. They are locked in a hard struggle to get legislative changes so that they can legally demand collective bargaining with the companies. But the union is also devoting a lot of its energies to organizing in Nova Scotia and P.E.I. They have established two new regional locals, and are having meetings with fishermen in all the major fishing areas this winter.

Everywhere the union encounters barriers to organization very similar to those I have described in the one community in eastern Nova Scotia. Organizing the "unorganizable" is not just a card-signing process: the fishermen must develop through struggle a clear knowledge of their actual productivity, of their non-marginality. They must be convinced in very concrete terms that unity and militant action can affect the overall underdevelopment of the industry (and thereby of the region). And they must be given a very tangible vision of what a developed industry would be like.

This is the work of the Maritime Fishermen's Union that is going on and which has met with significant successes at this early stage. The interest, the organizational base and the militant leadership are clearly there to be mobilized.

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The small inshore boats, like these in Herring Cove, form the back bone of the inshore fishing fleet.