

National Sea Products

and what the Nova Scotia Fishing Industry means to some of the people who work in it.



By JOHN McMANUS

In the early summer of 1968, the workers of the National Sea Products plants in Halifax staged a wildcat walkout.

One of the many called during the past several years, it was indicative of the poor working conditions experienced by the employees.

This particular strike was called when slips (warnings prior to suspension) and suspensions were given men who had taken a holiday on Victoria Day. These men had misinterpreted Article 10 in the 1966-1967 Collective Bargaining Agreement which reads as follows:

Article 10

Plant Holidays

1. The company will pay an employee, who has completed one year of continuous service, for eight hours at his current straight time basic rate for each of the following statutory holidays:

New Year's Day
Good Friday

Victoria Day . . . and so on.

2. When a plant holiday occurs during an employee's vacation HE SHALL RECEIVE THE HOLIDAY FOR WHICH HE IS ELIGABLE.

It is, of course, very easy to misinterpret this article. Those who did so received slips and suspensions. Not surprisingly, tempers were lost and the wildcat began. This ended only after a court injunction forced the men to return to work. They did this only because their union leaders would have faced jail terms otherwise.

The Management of National Sea Products used the underlined sections of Article 10 to justify giving the slips. This policy is apparently used because of the labor shortage and the perishable nature of the product; it is necessary to process the fish immediately after it is unloaded.

The workers find the issuing of slips humiliating and have objected to it, and many men have left after receiving them. They have not been effective in anyway, yet they are still issued.

Though the two Halifax plants pay the highest wages in the industry in Nova Scotia, the average income is about \$3500. In the Sea-Seald Division plant work members of at least five families who are on welfare. In most families the wife has to work to add to the family income.

The disparity in the wages paid throughout Nova Scotia by the various National Sea Products plants is startling. The Lockeport Division has a boy's

rate (under 16) of \$1.17. This is increased to \$1.32 a month between 16 and 18 years of age and finally when they are past 18 they are paid the basic men's rate of \$1.37. The girl's rate is \$1.10.

In Halifax fish plants the average labor rate is \$1.68 for men. The women are paid \$1.25. Apparently the Halifax plants do not hire boys under 16. Sea-Seald Division, as does its sister plant at Forty Fathoms, desperately needs modernization.

The method of removing fish from boats is extremely dangerous: a tub is filled with fish and then winched to a chute positioned high above the hatches, where it is emptied by a chute man.

As the tubs are raised and lowered to the hatches they endanger the men working within them. The chuteman, who has to work in exposed conditions in all types of weather, is similarly disregarded. On the other hand, the plant at Lunenburg uses a conveyer-belt system to do the same job, making it both safer and more efficient.

The Sea-Seald Division plant is also inadequately heated. During the winter the plant is frequented by chilly drafts. The heaters excessively warm a small area, and the employees in it, leaving the majority of men and women uncomfortable, forcing them to wear extra clothing within the plant for warmth.

The lighting is poor and the noise level excessive. When all the skinning machines are operating it is necessary to shout to be heard. This noise is the probable cause of headaches and edginess often experienced by employees.

The men and women change in rooms infested by cockroaches. It is customary for each worker to shake his or her boots before putting them on. Lunch cans are often hung, especially by all the older workers, on twisted hangers attached to the ceiling.

On the wharf there is only one sink which is used by well over thirty men. Here, too, are the ever-present cockroaches.

The men do not particularly complain about the work. They are used to it. They do, however, want to make enough money so that they might live in decent conditions, and be able to send their children through school.

Apathy, or maybe antipathy on the part of the public media has certainly not helped labor. With no public support, there can be no progress in this field. As one of the men said to me, "We hear Trudeau talk of his just society, and what have we here?"



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