

## N. S. FISHING INDUSTRY

# Workers toil, companies take



by Gene Barrett  
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Six mornings a week, a Guysborough County fisherman gets up to start his workday at 1:30 or 2 o'clock in the morning. At 5 o'clock in the evening, some 15 hours later, he gets home. For his efforts he is paid 14 cents a pound for cod, the same price he got three years ago. He and his fellow Guysborough fishermen averaged \$4,000 each from their catches last year.

A fish plant worker in Lismore doesn't get up to go to work at all any more. She, and about 85 others like her, hasn't had a job in more than half a year. The plant she worked in, the town's only industry, closed down without warning one day last summer, and she doesn't know when or if it will open again.

Meanwhile W.O. Morrow, president of National Sea Products, was receiving an invitation to join the renowned Lloyd's of London. It's an exclusive club, with a traditional, if crude, standard for membership — how much money a person has. Morrow, apparently, has enough.

Low wages and uncertain jobs for most, tremendous wealth for a few — it's the age-old story of the Nova Scotia fisheries.

### TWO BATTLES

Two battles, so closely mixed together that it is hard to distinguish one from the other, have marked the lives of those who live by fishing. From the beginning they've had to struggle against the fierce elements of nature to wrest a meagre living from the sea. At the same time they've fought over and over again to win prices and conditions which would make their battle for simple survival outdated.

The story of these battles began in the early part of the 1900's when, even by today's tough standards, conditions for fishermen were desperate. This was in large part due to the structure of the industry. Even as late as 1950 the local fishing business, though dominated by a few large firms, was mostly made up of many small, specialized, often family-based operations. Some firms were buying from the fishermen, others were processing, sometimes still others acted as wholesalers, and then there was the retailer yet to come. With all these businessmen each getting a bite out of every pound of fish sold, fishermen ended up with as little as a fraction of a cent a pound for fish most other Nova Scotians could barely afford.

Today the industry's domination by a few firms, who take the product the whole way from the fisherman to the grocery shelves, is complete. And while the companies could more easily afford to buy fish for higher prices and pay plant workers more, their greed hasn't changed. They've learned how to use the greater power which has come along with their size to keep the industry's workers in the same miserable conditions.

### THREE GROUPS

The people who do the work in our fishing industry can be bunched in three broad groups — plant workers, independent inshore fishermen, and the men who work on offshore trawlers and dragnets. Each group has unique problems, of course, but they face in common the same major difficulties: seasonal employment, low pay, and dwindling fish stocks. In the last 40 years they've found one more thing in common — for the first time all are

fighting back against the power of the monopolies and their government allies.

Even though he often works the longest hours in the dirtiest conditions for the lowest pay, it's the inshore fisherman whose conditions of work make him least able, of all the workers in the fishing industry, to organize and fight back. Labouring as they do individually, or with just another man or two, hardly having the time to catch a breath let alone the leisure to talk over common problems, and all too often being too independent to join in a united stand, some inshore fishermen have not always been ready to form a union.

Still, inshore fishermen were organized well before others in the industry (in protective associations as early as 1905, the Fisherman's Federation in the 20's, and the United Maritimes Fishermen in the 1930's.) But then, for nearly 15 years from the mid 30's on, the offshore men and plant workers set the pace, breaking with associations and forming a union.

### THE UNION

The Canadian Seaman's Union, a large industrial union strongest on the Great Lakes, began the first organizing effort in Nova Scotia. The campaign, led by Pat Sullivan, Charles Murray and Dane Parker, founded a single union including offshore fishermen, plant workers, even some inshore fishermen. It was the Canadian Fishermens Union.

Seeing the organization as a threat to their traditional domination of the workers, the companies unanimously refused to recognize or bargain with the union. With the support of Angus L. MacDonald's provincial government the companies embarked on a 20-year anti-union drive.

Three hard-fought strikes, two in 1938 in Lunenburg and Halifax, and one in 1939 in Lockport, marked the early stages of the struggle. Following the 1939 strike plant workers won collective bargaining rights, but offshore and inshore fishermen were forbidden by law from unionizing.

In 1947, following a war-time lull in union activity, the CFU again fought to win bargaining rights for offshore fishermen. Once more the industry was shut down in a long and bitter strike. To turn public opinion against the fishermen, the companies whipped up the anti-union right-wing hysteria then sweeping North America. Ralph Bell, the founder of National Sea Products, criss-crossed the province, led by full-page newspaper ads and filling the airwaves with radio interviews, all with one theme — the union was a communist plot; it threatened the freedom of the fishermen themselves, indeed the whole province!

The strike collapsed, leaving the fishermen demoralized, their union broke, and the labour movement running scared. Capitalizing on their victory, the government shoved through new labour legislation which formally restricted fishermen to one organization, the long-dead Fishermen's Federation of Nova Scotia. Once again divided from their co-workers, the fish-plant section of the union collapsed as well.

### 20 YEARS LATER

It would be more than 20 years, beginning with the monumental Canso strait trawlermen's strike, before strong union sentiment would again be a force among fishermen. But when it came back, it came on a wave of fierce determination, the like of which has seldom been seen even in a province with a long history of labour

battles.

For more than a year, beginning in March 1970, trawlermen from the town of Canso, Petit de Grat, and Mulgrave, fought to win recognition for their union, the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union.

For years the men and their families had suffered under the whim and will of the fish companies. Low wages did nothing to compensate for the brutally long hours worked, or the weeks spent away from families. The men worked in peril on ships so unsafe that even the lifeboats were rusted to the hull. They knew they needed a strong union.

One of the early lessons a new and militant organization learns is that when the chips are down, they face more than the companies alone. Along with Acadia and Booth Fisheries were all the allies the companies could muster. The provincial government gave willingly of its courts, jailing strikers for up to nine months for the crime of walking a picket line. Just like it did in the 40's, the *Chronicle-Herald* sang harmony with the companies — running scare headlines, featuring distorted stories. Other fish companies filled Acadia's and Booth's contracts, guaranteeing them their markets when the fight was over.

### DETERMINATION PLUS ORGANIZATION

The trawlermen had their weapons, too. The chief one was their daring and iron determination, driving them towards a goal they knew was a just one. The union organization, blending the most capable of the local organizers with West Coast men who had years of successful organizing experience, gave the fishermen the full measure of good leadership that the struggle deserved.

And they were not alone. Though in the end they got less than the total support they earned, there were a few times when it seemed like the whole province stood poised, ready to join them in the fray. For each man jailed tens came to take his place. In June, 1970 thousands — from Halifax to Cape Breton, construction workers to coal miners — walked out to protest the vicious jail sentences, forcing the courts to release the men right away.

But if the men were determined, the companies were desperate. They would never, they vowed, let the United Fishermen get a foothold in Nova Scotia, for they feared its grass-roots dedication to its members and its militant-fighting stand on their behalf.

Little by little, the fishermen were stalemated. In the end, when the Canadian Food and Allied Workers Union crawled in through the back door, signed 'sweetheart agreements' and won company recognition against the will of the workers, the men lost their union.

They lost, but this cannot diminish the accomplishments of this determined band of workers and their families. By standing up to the companies they not only got their first signed agreement, they not only won for all offshore fishermen the right to bargain collectively, a historic accomplishment in its own right. They also rekindled, in those who live by fishing, an interest in uniting to fight for better lives.

What's won from now on will be their victory, too.

### NEXT TIME

It's impossible to guess in advance who among fishing industry workers will come to the fore in the next battle. It could be fish plant employees, if the fighting spirit of the woman of Lismore is any indication. Their seven month long struggle to have their plant reopened has shown that even unorganized workers are capable of unexpected resoluteness and militancy.

Or it could be inshore fishermen. A number of tough new Associations have been formed in the past couple of years. Their brand-new strength and sense of purpose was shown during the successful Northumberland Fisherman's Association boycott of local lobster buyers this past summer.

But it may well be the present crisis in the industry will require the united efforts of all the workers to solve it. "Dwindling stocks" is the term most often used, and it means that foreign fleets are taking more of the catch than ever before, that Canadian vessels are forced more and more to fish inshore (where they are joined by ships of other nations, too), that inshore fishermen are bringing home fewer and smaller fish than they ever have before, and that plant workers have to squeeze shorter periods of work between longer periods of unemployment.

If it keeps up, there will be no fish left for Nova Scotians to catch.

To save their livelihood is a critical task, but is also a huge one. Will Nova Scotia fishermen be able to forge the tremendous unity needed, stand firm for common goals agreed to by strong and united organizations?

Or maybe, after years of struggle, after many past disappointments, fishermen will give up, learn to accept their fate? Maybe the fire's gone out?

One fisherman answered these questions with a few of his own: "Have the companies gone away? Have they started to pay decent prices? When did they begin to manage to pay stocks so that we'll have a future? Have we any dignity left to fight for?"

The embers left from past fires are still glowing. Who knows what new breeze will fan them back into flames again?

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