

**Latin America/ Brazil****Struggle for life always!**

***Fisherwomen in Brazil create their own national organization to struggle for their rights, and for life***

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In March 2006, fisherwomen of Brazil took an important step towards their organization and mobilization. At the Second National Conference on Fisheries in Brasília, fisherwomen from different regions of Brazil organized themselves and struggled very successfully to highlight their specific rights. At the end of the conference, an independent national organization called 'National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil' was created. One month later, on 8 and 9 April 2006, the organization had its first meeting in Recife, Pernambuco. In the subsequent month, this newborn organization was accepted as a regular member of the National Council for Fisheries, comprising different interest groups and institutions related to the sector.

During the first term of the administration of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, from 2002 to 2006, two national conferences on aquaculture and fisheries were organized, in September 2003 and March 2006. These conferences were preceded by State-level conferences throughout the country. A national meeting for women workers in fisheries was also organized in December 2004, again preceded by State-level meetings.

The purpose of the conferences and meetings was to provide opportunities to government officials to interact directly with fisherfolk in order to ensure that their situation and demands could be incorporated into specific public policies. At the same time, the conferences were undoubtedly precious opportunities for fishworkers to consolidate their class consciousness and set up their own organizations. During the three-day events, over 2,000 representatives of the sector, from different parts of

the country, met and reported on their specific realities, and defined and discussed their priorities and demands. Fisherwomen delegates were particularly aware that such opportunities were rare, and so they used these conferences as an opportunity to strengthen their consciousness, organization and mobilization, grounded in vision, courage and dignity.

The foundation of the 'National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil' was the culmination of a process that had begun at least three years ago, in September 2003, during the First National Conference on Fisheries, when fisherwomen from different parts of the country began to discuss their situation. They realized soon enough that the general conference did not give proper attention to their specific problems, and, therefore, requested the government to organize a national meeting of fisherwomen. The government accepted their demand, and, in the following year, 2004, the First National Meeting of Women Workers in Fisheries was organized, preceded by State-level meetings. Despite the fact that the national meeting was convened by the government, it was very helpful for fisherwomen to voice their demands publicly, in an independent and forceful manner.

When fisherwomen arrived at the Second National General Conference on Fisheries in March 2006, they had already accumulated organizational experience. This made them the group with the highest mobilizing capacity among all participants. They had clearly defined three goals for the conference: (i) to gain a slot in the proceedings schedule for a fisherwoman to deliver a speech at the opening and closing ceremony, to express their specific needs; (ii) to change the rules and settings of the conference by adding a clause to ensure that the composition of the permanent presiding table had at least 30 per cent women representatives; and (iii) to get the General Conference to approve the document finalized at the National Meeting of Women Workers in Fisheries, in 2004, as a way to legitimize their demands of being part of the fisheries class.

A strong demonstration by fisherwomen prior to the opening of the conference called the attention of the organizing committee, and the opportunity was created for a speech to be delivered by a fisherwoman



representative during the opening ceremony. The group also succeeded in ensuring that the organizing committee of the conference comprised 30 per cent women. Two hundred signatures were collected for the approval of this change in the general assembly of the conference, a change that was finally approved by all delegates. The group also collected more than 400 signatures in two hours in support of a legislative change that would recognize activities performed by women, related both directly and indirectly to fisheries. Several activities, both in the pre- and post-harvest sector, are usually performed by women. It was hoped that this project would ensure recognition of this work and confer labour rights on fisherwomen.

Following the intense and successful mobilization, the women's group met one more time and founded the 'National Articulation of Fisherwomen in Brazil'. The first meeting of this organization took place during 8 and 9 April 2006 in Recife, with the support of the Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP), a branch of the Catholic church committed to social causes. There were around 70 participants.

Fisherwomen discussed the principles and goals of the organization, and defined the first plan of action for the next term. A foundation letter was written, which synthesized the history of the struggle of fisherwomen, expressed their main problems, and established principles and priority demands. The

principles highlighted were: solidarity, autonomy, democracy, respect of differences, and respect for the environment. Among the demands prioritized were the valorization of the fisherwomen's identity and their struggle against discrimination and violence of all kinds. The foundation letter ended with the phrase "Struggle for life always!", which synthesized well the spirit of these courageous women founders. The main challenges at present are to increase grassroots participation; promote gender and class consciousness; and strengthen mobilization at local, regional and national levels.

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