

The beginning of the end

Canada may have become the Guardian Angel of the Atlantic, but the losers in the fight over halibut can only be the Galician fisherfolk

The slashing of halibut quotas in the waters of Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) is yet another nail in the coffin for the long-distance fleet of Galicia, hit by the worst fishery crisis since the 1980s.

In March 1994, Canada unilaterally declared a law which, in violation of international maritime rights, empowers them to inspect and arrest foreign fishermen in international waters, under the guise of marine conservation. The Canadian threat to Galician and Portuguese boats began from that time. Galician crews working in the NAFO area denounced this law that very year. This was the first part of the strategy planned by the government of Ottawa to expel the European fleet from the area adjoining the Grand Banks.

The NAFO meeting in Halifax last September rewarded Canadian pressure with two victories. Not only did this international organization for fisheries development fail to denounce the law to extend the EEZ, but NAFO went on to reduce the total halibut quota to 27,000 tonnes, thereby limiting access to European fishing boats.

Existing data on the halibut fishery in this region suggests the need for caution in exploiting this species. Hence, NAFO decided to impose, for the first time, a TAC (total allowable catch) limit. The scientific committee of the organization recommended limiting catches to 40,000 tonnes. However, Ottawa fought to get this reduced to 27,000 tonnes. There followed a very close voting in which Cuba's support proved decisive.

Under pressure from the fisheries sector and the governments of Galicia and Spain, the EU, which did not initially oppose the

TAC of 27,000 tonnes, objected to the final allocation of quotas, which allowed 56 boats—Galician and Portuguese—to catch 3,400 tonnes of halibut for 1995, and fixed an overall quota of 18,630 tonnes for its fleet. The NAFO agreement incorporates a clause by which members can raise objections on quota allocations. In response, Canada applied a moratorium throughout the entire fishing ground, which the EU did not accept.

The tension and threats finally spilled over to the fishing grounds. On 9 March, Canadian patrol boats, violating international law, chased, fired on and captured the Vigo fishing boat *Estai*, accusing it of illegal fishing in international waters regulated by NAFO.

In Galicia, the response was one of complete indignation. The community came out in force against this arrest, and 100,000 people demonstrated in Vigo in support of the fishing fleet and demanded the unconditional release of the boat and its captain.

Contravention

In the meantime, the day after the arrest of the boat, the EU negotiated a new quota allocation with Canada, the nation which had contravened international regulations and rights. The negotiations continued while the fishing fleet remained powerless against new attacks from the Canadian navy, also in international waters, which included cutting the trawl cables, endangering sailors' lives.

The results were exactly what one would expect from negotiations carried out under armed threat. Canada doubled its halibut quotas and vigorously maintained the extension of its 200-mile zone, promising not to arrest any more European boats, and the EU reduced its

fishing opportunities by a quarter. The terms and conditions of the conditions under which the agreement was negotiated have created a growing mistrust of the EU within the Galician fishery sector.

Firmly, and supported by arguments of conservation rejected by Greenpeace, Canada began a campaign to discredit the European fleet, accusing it of committing repeated infringements. The Canadian authorities forgot to report to their countrymen the violation of a rational agreement on fishery resources within their own waters. They used this 'crusade against foreigners' to momentarily resolve their internal political problems, the demands for independence and the need to satisfy their 40,000 unemployed fishermen. The Canadian government presented itself to the world as the Guardian Angel of the Atlantic.

The Canadian campaign of self-promotion was even well received within the EU. It was chiefly England and Ireland who openly supported the Canadian position during the conflict and the negotiations, thus breaking the principle of unity within the EU and creating a breach across the defence of Spanish and Portuguese interests.

Until this year, boats from Galicia and Portugal fishing in the north-west

Atlantic have caught, on average, 62,000 tonnes of halibut annually. Of this, 43,000 tonnes came from the Galician fleet. The 1995 fishing quotas for these fleets have been cut to 11,000 tonnes by the bilateral agreement. This was accepted by Spain but rejected by Galicia and not ratified by Portugal, the other EU country affected.

Today there are 38 Galician freezer trawlers with 1,250 crew members working in this fishery, where the 180 or so boats which used to operate in the Namibian waters have relocated after the moratorium in 1990.

The halibut fishery indirectly generates around 9,000 land-based jobs, which range from storage and marketing to the manufacture of nets, fishing gears, boatyards, and rope making. The combined catching and processing sectors of the halibut fishery generate a total of 20 billion pesetas annually.

Worsening crisis

With the quota cuts, revenue loss will be as high as 18 billion pesetas, according to the estimates of boatowners. They fear that the economic crisis will only worsen, with a greater loss of market for halibut in Europe, including Italy and France, and foreign markets like Japan. These cuts will make redundant two-thirds of the existing crew members and some 7,000 shore workers. The entire fishery employs around 30,000 people, almost four per cent

of the active workforce. The overall socio-economic impact of reduced catches in every fishing ground worked by the Galician fleet is far more serious.

Over half the Galician population—three million people—live along the coast. Fishing and fishery-related activities like processing and shellfish extraction make up the economic fabric of the coastal communities. Every seagoing job indirectly generates four more shore-based jobs. The fishery accounts for more than 6.5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product.

The region of Morrazo, next to Vigo, along with others farther from Vigo, like La Guardia and Ribeira, are among the areas worst hit by the agreement between the EU and Canada. Half the active workforces here live off the sea, mainly working on the long-distance fleet. Unemployment and poverty will convert these fishing communities into social dustbins.

Apart from the grave socio-economic consequences and the implications of having accepted the outcome of negotiations under threat of violence, the halibut war also underlines the inability of international organizations to manage fisheries. NAFO still has not called a joint meeting to address the serious problem which has arisen in the waters for which it is responsible.

The member states of the organization, except Poland, have preferred that Canada and the EU reach a bilateral solution, instead of negotiating a joint resolution to the conflict.

Ever since its foundation, NAFO has witnessed an increasing degradation of the resources under its management, until it has had to impose moratoriums on fishing some species due to stock collapses.

NAFO, like other bodies which regulate fishery zones, legally protects signatories who do not fulfill agreements on quotas and other conservation measures. To this limited management capacity is added the lack of political will of the fishing powers. But one cannot continue to merely play at management.

The FAO statistics are quite clear on the situation of exploitation, overexploitation and decline of this planet's fishing grounds. There are no industrial fishing fleets which abide by the rules, and Galicia, as the leading fishing power of Europe, has to take its share of the responsibility too.

Namibia, Boston, the Malvinas, Morocco and Argentina are all destinations for the Galician fleet. The reduction in the number of boats is a necessity imposed by the current state of the stocks and the increasing development of the fishery sectors of coastal nations in the Third World.

Long recession

For almost two decades, Galician fishery activities have suffered from an uninterrupted recession. In spite of an annual loss of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, the fishery sector is still not recognized as one needing rationalization. Boatowners have been systematically subsidized by the EU to scrap and export their boats. However, for the crew, there are no alternatives to early retirement or unemployment.

The role of unions and governments is to put in place measures to train and redeploy sailors in other activities, to encourage the development of businesses and co-operatives, in short, to guarantee the workers' rights to a source of work.

Until now, it has been easier to pay boatowners to decommission their boats or redeploy them to other fishing grounds. But now there are no free seas left. For the Galician fleet, the halibut war marks the beginning of the end. **3**

This article, by Monica Justo, from the fishing port of Vigo Province of Galicia in north-west Spain, has been translated by Brian O'Riordan