

Island notes

Although the Fogo Island Co-operative is a successful venture, women members are still unjustly treated

Since the late 1960s, Fogo Island, on the northeast coast of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, has been the site of a remarkably successful fishing co-operative which serves six island communities, home to over 2,500 people. Over the years, the Fogo Island Co-operative has made it possible for people to continue to live on the island, depending on the inshore and nearshore fisheries for income and employment.

The co-operative was always seen as both an economic and a social institution. During the 1980s it was able to expand the work opportunities for islanders by developing fish and crab plants, which came to employ up to 500 women and men. Today it runs a plant for filleting and freezing groundfish as well as capelin, lumpfish roe, herring, and other products; another for crab processing; and, as of July 2000, one for shrimp processing.

Both the fishers and the fish-plant workers have the opportunity to be members and hence owners of the co-operative. The fish-plant workers have resisted efforts to bring them into a union that represents almost all the fish-plant workers and fishers, in the rest of Newfoundland and Labrador. "We are all in the same boat" this seems to have been the ideology.

However, there is often tension between management and the fish-plant workers, and even more so, between the plant workers and the large-scale longliner fishers.

These fishers are heavily represented on the co-operative's board of directors and have a strong say in its policies, including fish plant policy. The fact that their large vessels, equipped for turbot, crab and shrimp fishing, supply the plants with

most of the raw product upon which fish-plant jobs depend, plays a major role in the story that follows.

In July 1999, a group of women met at a local motel with a representative of the province's Human Rights Commission, upset and angered because each of them had lost her job at the co-operative's crab plant. The reason was a new hiring policy: it was based on ability and seniority, but "with preference given to family members" of fishers who delivered all of their fish and shellfish to the co-operative, rather than to other buyers. The July 1999 meeting, and others, resulted in a formal hearing at the end of March 2000. As of this writing (the end of July 2000), no decision has been reached in the matter, and most of the women are no longer working for the co-operative. They are struggling to make ends meet as low-paid home-care workers, baby-sitters, or by simply trying to make do with no income of their own.

The following report of the situation includes testimony at the March 2000 hearing as reported in the island's monthly newsletter, the *Fogo Island Flyer*. Many of the 33 women who filed complaints had long been co-operative members in good standing. A typical situation, as seen below, was where their spouses had been small-scale inshore fishers who shipped their lobsters traditionally to a buyer off the island.

Women's problems

Another typical situation was where a woman's spouse or boyfriend worked on a nearshore longliner vessel, and the owner decided to ship his fish or crabs off the island. Another issue was whether all members understood and agreed with the policy, which was brought up at a general meeting in March. The long-standing local

dilemma is that the co-operative depends on the raw product of the fishers, and the fishers thus claim some 'right' to ask that their own family members get special consideration in the fish and crab plants.

On the other hand, workers claim the right to be judged and rewarded on the basis of their commitment and experience (i.e. seniority) and their ability, no matter whom they live with and are related to. Complaints about hiring for other reasons—the so-called 'fishermen's wives' preference—are long-standing. Bringing the situation to a head is increased competition with other buyers for the fish and crabs caught by Island fishers.

In 1999, a large number of longliners began to ship their catches elsewhere, in many cases because they needed financing to do well in the new crab and shrimp fisheries. The co-operative's board of directors can not legally force members to sell to it. They found another pressure point: the jobs of fishers' family members.

In the March 2000 hearing, the first witness who took the stand was long-time employee, Irene Nippard, who had begun her employment with the co-operative under its first manager, back in the early 1970s.

Nippard stated for the court that in losing her position, "it was as if someone belonging to me had died. It couldn't have hurt any worse. To be employed for so many years in the same industry and to be let go because my husband didn't ship his lobster to the co-op hit me hard. I looked forward to every spring when the plant would be up and running, but last year, when the plant opened and work started, I didn't get a call, while the rest of my shift went in to work. It was odd because I was on top of the seniority list and, under normal circumstances, would have been among the very first. Soon the phone started ringing and I began talking to other workers who also didn't get called in [to work]. I spoke to Pad Shea [the crab plant manager] and he told me that I lost my job because my husband didn't ship his lobster to the co-op. I questioned him further. He said my husband would have

to sign an agreement to sell all his lobster to the co-op. We decided to attend the board meeting the next morning and find out what was going on."

Although Nippard was upset, she continued with her story: "I told my husband about the agreement and he was willing to sign it, but I said 'no way'. After 20 years of working with the co-op, I shouldn't have to do this." Irene also stated, "The Fogo Island Co-op always said that hiring was done by seniority, but they have never done it properly." However, in the end, Irene was among the few workers who had their spouses sign the co-operative's agreement and, as promised, found herself back at work within a day or two.

Daphne Bailey was next to take the stand. Like Nippard, Bailey too felt pressured into having her husband sign the agreement and, when asked by her lawyer how it made her feel, her response was, "I felt like a nobody. I wasn't a person." Bailey too had been employed at the plant for 21 years and stated she had no clear understanding of the new hiring policy.

The next witness called was Doreen Keats, an employee of almost 20 years. She stated that she contacted management for verification of the new policy, as her husband is a crew member on his brother's longliner, which doesn't ship to the co-operative. Doreen stated that Kirk Decker, manager of the plant where Doreen has worked for almost 15 years, acknowledged to her that "he felt as though he was caught between a rock and a hard place". Keats explained that she was forced to look for work and eventually was employed as a home-care worker.

Betty Brett was next to testify. She was told she was not on [the call-in] list either and was told that management assumed that her spouse/boyfriend was fishing as a crew member aboard a vessel that did not ship their product to the co-operative. Brett did go to work, but only received five to six days of employment, as her spouse did get a berth with a longliner.

Last testimony

The final witness to be called on behalf of the employees was Rita Penton. Her

testimony was a little different, as she held a supervisory position as a forelady, and also because her husband was part owner of a vessel that did not ship to the co-operative.

She explained that her husband and his partner could not get financial backing from the co-operative to enter the new shrimp fishery and so looked elsewhere, which meant a commitment to deliver the shrimp elsewhere too. She also explained exactly how the list of workers to be called in was created, including a new category called “non-affiliated”, resulting in many women being moved to the bottom of the seniority list. She talked about how surprised and upset she was when she found out that she too had lost her seniority and job: “I was shocked at losing my job because of something my husband had done that I had no control over?The plant had become my second home, my second family, and that in the year 2000, this should not be happening.”

On the second day, George Lee testified that he had been a part of the formation of the Fogo Island Co-operative Society, which became internationally known as the ‘Fogo Process’ and “was a means of educating people on solving their own problems and furthering economic development.” He explained that the process involved several growing pains all through the years, with moments of

crisis, perhaps among the worst being the cod moratorium beginning 1992, and the most recent being the decline in raw material with vessels leaving the co-operative to ship elsewhere. Lee stated, “The fishermen who stayed around and continued selling their catch to the co-op have helped economic growth and have kept the plants in operation. Fogo Island would have had difficulty surviving if it were not for their continued support.”

Wayne Cull, Project Co-ordinator for the co-operative was the next to testify. Regarding the last hiring policy, he commented, “With approximately 20 Fogo Island boats shipping their catch elsewhere, we were forced to do what was in the very best interest of the co-op to ensure its survival.” Cull also stated, “To accommodate members whose spouses are supporting other businesses, we would be helping to subsidize another business, often at our own expense.”

The lawyer for the plant workers then asked Cull to sum up the management decision on hiring. Cull replied, “It was only fair to hire workers who were full supporters of the co-op.”

President’s testimony

Cecil Godwin, current President of the Board of Directors, and Vice President of the Federation of Co-operatives, was the next to testify. He stated, “The hiring problems have been going on for years

and that, in an attempt to find closure to the very festering problem, the co-op had gone out and arranged community-based meetings to hear from members and to listen to their complaints and try to come up with a solution that would be in their best interest.”

General Manager Hugh St. Croix was the last witness called to the stand on behalf of the co-operative’s lawyer. St. Croix described the state of affairs that the business was in [allegedly close to financial bankruptcy] when he came to the position. He described the low morale and the every-present seniority issue and how it could not be rectified to suit everyone.

Day Three saw the closing arguments from Barry Fleming, for the Human Rights Commission, and Christine Fagan, for the Fogo Island Co-operative Society. Briefly, the Human Rights Commission’s argument was that the women workers were discriminated against because they were not hired because of their spouse’s activities. In addition, the new “preference policy” had no rational basis because it had nothing to do with the efficient work of the women. Moreover, the co-operative was not acting in good faith because the membership voted down a resolution to amend the constitution to reflect this policy but the board of directors passed it. “The fact is that the ability of these workers had nothing to do with being a family member of a 100 per cent supporting fisherman. Essentially, it’s a case of ‘The Devil made me do it.’ They had to secure products to keep the plant operations going. They were responding to a threat by fishermen and they wanted to ensure employment for their families”, Fleming said.

Christine Fagan invited the court to recognize the unique aspects of this case. “It is a unique industry that has been owned and operated by its members. We heard in Mr. Cecil Godwin’s testimony that the co-operative has a social conscience, and that the co-operative has delivered a service that no other entity could have filled back then. The fish-plants would not have survived without the establishment of the co-operative. Thirteen million dollars were paid out to its employees last year,

and it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the co-operative’s contribution to the Island,” she said. She also discussed the problems in plant and employee management which had escalated during 1998, and the need to “restore fairness and balance, and to find some sort of control within the business and to ensure its economic survival.”

Although Fogo Island, a small island in the North Atlantic, is remote, it is firmly enmeshed in a globalized system. In this case, globalization and its regional and local echoes have played a role in making life very difficult for women whose only income-producing opportunity, by and large, is working in the fishery. Fogo Island’s co-operative is an institution created to provide some buffer to the worst side-effects of globalization, the displacement of people due to overexploitation of natural resources and the movement of capital. As a co-operative rather than a private business, it can endure far more belt-tightening and non-profit years on behalf of its members and workers.

More recently, the Fogo Island Co-operative has been in the throes of competition for raw product with numerous other buyers, with other communities struggling with unemployment and failed fisheries, and with its own members trying to make the best of the very bad situation of the cod moratorium of the 1990s. It has diversified, and its crab fishery and crab plant helped families get through the groundfish crisis. However, the crab fishery’s season gets shorter by the year, reducing the chances that plant workers will qualify for unemployment benefits during the long winter off-season. Forced to compete on a global market, the co-operative has invested in a new, more efficient crab plant—with a much-reduced workforce. Competition for jobs at the plant increases, and the need for clear rules about hiring and firing goes up.

No financing

Meanwhile, competition for the crabs caught by Fogo Island’s large longliner vessels, and the inability of the co-operative to offer them financing to upgrade their vessels for the crab fishery

and the new shrimp fishery, combined with more specific issues, has resulted in the loss of many boats to other buyers. Plant capacity is far higher than the raw product available. This means less work. The co-operative's board of directors hit upon a solution to both problems in its 'preferential hiring' policy—increase incentives to deliver fish and crabs to the co-operative by requiring that the spouses or boyfriends of workers at the plants do so, and, at the same time, have a way to rationalize the reason for 'calling in' some women and not others.

Those made to pay the price of this survival strategy in an increasingly competitive environment are women workers at Fogo Island's fish and crab plants. As their testimonies indicate, their very identities, shaped by the intense, seasonal work at the plants, gets collapsed into those of their husbands and boyfriends by the new policy. No matter that they have their own memberships, share capital and work history, if their 'men' do not support the co-operative by shipping their lobsters, fish or crabs to it, neither do they support the co-operative — or such is the implication of the controversial new hiring policy. As one of the women said, "There is no winner here. There has been a great injustice done to the members of the Fogo Island Co-op." And as another said, "In the year 2000, this should not be happening." ❧

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