

Newfoundland and Labrador

Women are human too

Women workers are demanding to be judged and rewarded according to their commitment, experience and ability

by Carol Penton, Cheryl Cobb-Penton and Bonnie McCay

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Fogo Island is on the northeast coast of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Since the late 1960s it has been the site of a fishing cooperative which serves six island communities, home of over 2,500 people. The Fogo Island Cooperative has been remarkably successful over the years in helping make it possible for people to continue to live on the Island, dependent on the inshore and nearshore fisheries for income and employment.

The Co-op was always seen as both an economic and a social institution, and 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. The ideology has been "we are all in the same boat." But of late unionization has come under greater scrutiny as members search for a solution to the issues that face the general plant worker.

There has been a 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

Cooperative's board of directors and have a strong say in the co-operative's policy, including fish plant policy. This is because 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.

The long-standing local dilemma is that the Co-op 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 at 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 who they live with and are related to. Complaints about hiring for other reasons—the so-called 'fishermen's wives' preference—are long-standing. This situation came to a head recently. The Fogo Island Co-op 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. The Co-op has diversified, and its crab fishery and crab plant helped families get through the groundfish crisis in the early nineties. 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 invested in a new, more efficient crab plant—with a much-reduced work force. Competition for jobs at the plant increased, and the need for clear rules about hiring and firing went up. Meanwhile, competition for the crabs caught by Fogo Island's large longliner vessels, and the inability of the Co-op 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 has become far higher than the raw product available and there is less work.

The Co-op's board of directors hit upon a solution to both problems in its 'preferential hiring' policy, based on ability and seniority but 'with preference given to family members' of fishers who delivered all of their fish and shellfish to the cooperative, rather than to other buyers. These incentives were to increase raw product to the plants, ensuring that the benefits of employment

went to the members and were not shipped out to off-island buyers. Those members whose spouses shipped their catch elsewhere would therefore not be 'eligible' for employment at the plant.

As a result of this policy many senior women plant workers lost their jobs. They subsequently took the case to court. Many of the 33 women who filed complaints had long been Co-op members in good standing. A typical situation was one where their spouses had been small-scale inshore fishers who shipped their lobsters traditionally to a buyer off the Island. 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.



At the hearings in March 2000, testimonies were given by both the employees who had lost their jobs, and representatives of the Co-op. One of the women, who had held a supervisory position at the plant for many years, spoke of 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."

Representing the position of the Co-op, the Project Coordinator 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". He also stated, "to accommodate members whose spouses are supporting other businesses we would be helping to subsidize another business, often at our own expense" and that "it was only fair to hire workers who were full supporters of the Co-op."

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-op. 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.

Although Fogo Island is remote, a small island in the North Atlantic, it is firmly enmeshed in a globalized system. The Fogo Island Co-op's markets are established, yet ensuring its stability in a competitive marketplace is a priority. To add to this, globalization, regional and local issues are affecting the role of women, whose sole source of income is the fishery.