

Fishworkers

Strike!

As oversupply pushes down fish prices, fishermen in France have begun to agitate through direct action

Fishworkers in France will remember 1993 as the Black Year. Their anger exploded in February when, after the bad weather season, the fish-workers sailed again only to find that prices of fish had crashed.

As fish stocks piled up in the auction halls, the mechanism set up by the fishworkers' co-operatives to control prices was soon thrown out of gear. These co-operatives, built around each landing place, had been supporting the fishworkers' activities.

There were co-operatives for credit as well as for purchase of equipment. One specialised in buying and processing fish whenever prices fell below a 'floor price' set by the fishworkers themselves. The system had been very efficient for 40 years but suddenly came to a standstill.

Soon it became clear that the fish market was no longer controlled by the fishing harbours but by the airports where fresh and frozen fish landed in large quantities at prices far below the floor prices fixed by the fishermen. Fish was now a VIP travelling by plane!

In the fishing villages, it was soon desolation all around. Those who had purchased new boats with bank loans were in the red and families got heavily indebted. Solidarity committees of women were set up and became very involved in the whole movement.

As the co-operative system was paralysed, the unions, though divided by many different allegiances, swung into action. A Survival Committee co-ordinated various actions and set up its own cell to draft recommendations. In a first wave of protest, fish workers and their wives started distributing their fish

free of cost to the public. This created a lot of sympathy. They also threw away tonnes of unsaleable fish at various places and in front of government offices, including the Brussels' European Community (EC) office. Various 'attacks' on regional airports took place and fishworkers were seen keenly identifying the countries of origin of the fish boxes: Russia, Poland, the US, Peru and Senegal, among others.

For two months, huge demonstrations took place in various places of France: Bayonne, Quimper, Nantes, Boulogne and Lorient. But, on the whole, it was peaceful, with only marginal violence.

The most impressive action was the ransack, on the night of February 22, of the largest French marketplace called RUNGIS, close to one of the main airports of Paris.

This commando action brought the fishworkers' problem onto the TV screens of the world. The negotiations with the French Government and the EC authorities then started to really take shape. The first responses were of welfare measures money allowances and rescheduling of debt repayments.

Gaining allies

In Brittany, fishworkers also organised meetings and discussions with their British, Irish and Spanish counterparts in order to cross-check their analysis of the situation and to gain allies.

The EC has an old rule which provides for "community preference" in special cases. This could be applied in this situation.

Fish flowing into the markets from the rest of the world was so cheap that the supply upset all the profitability calculations of the European fishing fleets, particularly

those which had acquired new and costly equipment.

The Survival Committee decided to target its demands on fresh fish only, keeping the processing industry out, of the controversy. That proved to be a clever move which gained the fishworkers sympathy in many governmental and industrial circles.

The Committee claimed for 'community preference'. It got this for five cold-water species: cod, haddock, saithe, hake and angler-fish. Taxes would now be imposed at the point of entry into the EC so that the price of imported products would not impede the local fishermen's profitability.

This was only one of the main demands of the Survival Committee. It had also planned that the income from this tax should be paid back to Third World fishworkers' organisations to help them defend their members and ensure fair prices for their products.

Many Brittany fishworkers have travelled to various meetings in Senegal or West Africa. They have realised that artisanal fishworkers there often make distress sales on their beaches merely because they do not have ice or cold storage facilities to preserve the fish and ensure a better price.

Such exchanges have sowed the seeds of solidarity among fishworkers. Unfortunately their government ministers do not seem to be so accommodating.

The last action in the French fishworkers' agitation was a one-day 'dead sea' operation, when no boat went out to sea for 24 hours. There was also a huge demonstration in Luxembourg in front of the EC office, where the 12 fisheries ministers were meeting.

Meanwhile, the struggle is going on. Fishing has not really stopped. Fishermen are taking turns at sea and on land for various actions.

But many fear that to compensate for very low prices, there will soon be greater 'extraction' of resources. Overfishing for many species may well be just round the corner. That would be a tragic outcome of the current problems in France. ■

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