

AUTOPSY OF A STRIKE

The coastline of several thousand miles - from Quebec's Gaspé through New Brunswick's French shore to Nova Scotia's Cape Breton and including the Island Province of Prince Edward Island - embraces approximately one thousand herring gillnet vessels ranging from 30ft to 44ft in size with two and three fishermen a vessel. In the fall herring roe fishery of the Southern Gulf, these fishermen land approximately 50,000 tons of herring. It is an inshore fishery involving scores of small communities.

Michael Belliveau, general secretary of the Maritime Fishermen's Union, describes below his reflections on the strike of the summer of 88.

In the late sixties, the West Coast British Columbia Herring Seiner fishery collapsed and many of the seiners 60ft to 120 ft ended up on the East Coast in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. They were taking as much as 160,000 tons for fish meal. By the middle and the late seventies, a food fishery, mainly to Europe, developed but the stocks were collapsing as a result of seiner overfishing.

IT ALL STARTED BACK IN 1980

The inshore fishermen organised protest and demonstration against the seiners who were destroying the stocks and plugging the market. Much of the battle against the Seiners was spearheaded by the newly formed Maritime Fishermen's Union (1977), an inshore small boat fishermen's organisation. By the early eighties the inshore gillnetters were catching only a few thousand tons per year. But they successfully drove out all but six large seiners who were confined to 20 % of the quota after 1983. In the meantime, the inshore fishermen were subjected to three years of premature closures and unequal quota distribution before they settled on a fisheries management plan that was acceptable.

During this period, from 1983 to 1986 fishermen were observing the return of the herring and had to convince scientists of the same, in order to have quotas increased -to make a point, more than once they collectively defied Government closures.

By 1987, the herring had returned, the scientists were adjusting their assessment, and a herring roe market had developed in Japan; the fishermen landed over 55,000 tons of 'fall' herring (in August and September) and received 12 cents a pound & more! There was a strong sense among the fishermen that they had won the day with their own efforts and now they were fully involved in quality improvements (slush ice, etc...)

and strategic fishing that would increase the roe yields from 4% to 9% in some instances!

THE MOST IMPRESSIVE STRIKE IN THE HISTORY OF THE ST. LAWRENCE

As the 1988 summer progressed the inshore fishermen were expecting similar catches to 1987 and while there were rumours of the Japanese planning to drop prices, fishermen expected to at least equal 1987 prices since they knew that many buyer/processors made almost wind fall profits the year before.

The Prince Edward Island fleet of 150 vessels got started August 17 without a firm price - the Canadian buyers had not yet settled contracts with Japanese interests. On August 21, the larger New Brunswick fleet of 400 vessels was scheduled to open their fishery but they were being offered 8 cents a pound by local processors! The fleet unanimously agreed to tie-up and strike began. While officially the Maritime Fishermen's Union did not call for a strike, their fishermen in New Brunswick were leaders in the strike as they had been in the long battle with the seiners and the Government.

In the meantime Island fishermen continued to fish and some of their landings were being trucked into the struck plants of New Brunswick.

The Nova Scotia fleet of 150 vessels was scheduled to begin their fishery August 25 but they voted to tie up in support of New Brunswick and on advice from their Maritime Fishermen's Union fishermen. Then on August 29, Island fishermen decided on their own to tie up.

It was now the largest mass tie-up of inshore fishermen in the recent history of Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence fishery.

The strike was partially instigated in some places by small buyers themselves who felt pressure should be put on the Japanese. Information from the Canadian embassy in Japan seemed to confirm that the market of Japan was clear of 1987 inventories, that products coming from other countries had dropped or was facing parasite problems, and that Canadian East coast purchases would probably be up. But Japanese buyers did not budge, refusing to get involved in the dispute. At the end of the season, it was learned that some West coast herring roe that goes into Japan in February and March to a luxury market had been down graded and was competing with East coast roe!

As the tie-up progressed fishermen were faced with an increasing dilemma: the fish were spawning; if a settlement wasn't found quickly they would lose the whole season. A compromise formula was found in New Brunswick that would increase the base price by 1/2 cent and then buyers would pay so much extra for each percentage increase in roe yield. The New Brunswick fleet went back fishing September 4 and other fleets soon followed, although agreements were not reached in Prince Edward Island or Nova Scotia. In the end, fishermen did not reach their quotas because of the tie-up and bad weather and in the short run there was no felt success in the strike with some fishermen blaming the Union even though no formal Union procedure was ever followed.

SOME LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Fishermen's Union leaders were surprised by the strike, especially with the participation of the fleets of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. During the four years prior, the fleets from different provinces had been battling one another for quotas!

It was not an equal situation for all fishermen: the French speaking New Brunswickers rely on herring for a larger part of their year's income than in the other areas where the lobster catch is higher. The Prince Edward Island fleet did not belong to the Maritime Fishermen's Union, although they kept in touch during the strike. In the Province of New Brunswick, the fishermen have collective bargaining rights and some experience with bargaining; this may explain why they arrived at a marginally better settlement.

But, the strike highlighted the difficult position of the Fishermen's Union which does not have the resources and perhaps the internal solidarity to sustain such a broad-based tie-up especially when the season is so short (four weeks) and when buyer groups in each Province are distinct and when the product is all destined to the Japanese market whose importers appear able to dictate price and 'multiple-source' supply (including from herring seiner fleet in a completely different zone of the Atlantic fishery).

The inshore fishermen's strike might better be described as a spontaneous protest. There was little fore thought to it and no formal Union procedure was followed. Union and non-Union members alike joined in the tie-up and the leaders were left to bring some order to the thing, always under the constant pressure of the spawning fish and the insecurity of never knowing when the fishermen would go back fishing, having little means of imposing discipline!

Fishermen on the spawning grounds off North East New Brunswick where only vaguely aware of the fishermen in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia and no inter-provincial bargaining was attempted because the buyers refused. When New Brunswick began to tie-up, they struck a responsive chord in the other provinces hundreds of miles away.

The battles with the seiners and the Government over the years had built a sense among all inshore fishermen in the Southern Gulf that they had invested too much socially, politically and economically to go back to the poverty-type prices. But the time constraints almost guaranteed defeat; even had fishermen decided to sacrifice their whole season (perhaps 20% were willing to do this), it was not clear what their long term gains could be: the Japanese importers appeared to be untouchable.

Returning to fish with only marginal gains nevertheless provides the opportunity to plan for future years. But, some of the leaders feel a little 'set-up' by fishermen who are not regular backers of the Union, who in fact may have been instigated by local buyers, and who, when things were not instantly accomplished, blamed the Union!

Obviously, when so many of its own members were directly involved in the spontaneous tie-up the Union had to become involved and it is significant to note that violence, fishermen against fishermen, was much more prevalent on Eastern Prince Edward Island where the Union does not have a presence than in New Brunswick where there is a strong history of the Union. Still, how can the Union be expected to mold instant discipline among hundreds of fishermen who, in other circumstances, will have nothing to do with the Union. There are no laws in any of the three Provinces compelling fishermen to pay the Union dues even where the Union has a clear majority and no where were the fishermen so united as to be able to impose their will on the 'free-riders'. Under such conditions, the fishermen's organisation must be highly skillful in outlining the terms and conditions of its involvement if it is not to be burned by spontaneity that can ebb as fast as it flows!

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