

FROM EUROPE/Denmark

Democratizing the industry

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In Denmark, as in the rest of Europe, the fish processing industry has replaced much human labour with technologically refined, but expensive, machinery. Although the overall production has increased—or, at any rate, not decreased—the number of fish processing workers has declined. Due to the sexual division of labour in the fish processing industry, women, in particular, have been sacked in the process of technological automation. Against this depressing background, three male researchers, with an interest in action research, together with a group of uneducated fish processing workers from Esbjerg, one of the largest fishing ports in Denmark, have, since 1989, been working on a project called “Industrial Production and Happiness”.

Through a series of workshops, the group of unemployed fish processing workers developed their own vision of a democratic and sustainable fish processing industry. That vision was personified as a flower with five petals and an ovary. The first petal represented socially useful products; the second indicated that the work would follow human rhythms and needs; the third showed that the work would be planned and organized democratically by the workers in common; the fourth petal signified that work education and research would be organized simultaneously; and finally, the fifth petal symbolised that the whole plant would be collectively owned, and that only a collective agreement between the workers and owners would secure human rights. The result—the ovary—would be a new common sense or societal reasoning.

In 1995, the experiment intensified as a closed fish plant became the centre where the vision would materialize. When an invitation to engage in a social experiment to achieve such a model industry was first sent out, only women responded positively. Thus the project became a women's project. The utopian vision of the project incorporated several experimental dimensions:

1. The women would establish an open fish kitchen where consumers would take part in the development and evaluation of products.
2. The assembly belt would be replaced by a quality table where workers would be able to rotate places and talk amongst themselves. The processing technology would also optimize low-waste production and low-energy inputs, thus being a cleaner technology.
3. The waste water would be cleansed by the establishment of aquaculture so that nutrients could be used beneficially, instead of going to pollute the sea.
4. The educational aspect of the project sought to combine multipurpose fish processing and management training with general education.
5. The workplace would be run democratically by the workers in common.

The Women's Workers Union in Denmark, the national labour union of women fishworkers, embraced the project fully and paved the way for financial support. The women started work in 1995, focusing first on the open fish kitchen, education and democratic administration. They took decisions together after discussing all the relevant issues. The women began a self-teaching process with the help of the three affiliated researchers. The learning took place at workshops to which they invited experts in different fields related to the establishment of their model plant.

At these workshops, the experts did not offer “expert solutions” which defined the mode of production, but sought to serve the vision evolved by the women. The women also held several open kitchens to which consumers—ordinary people from Esbjerg—were invited. On the basis of the feedback they got, they decided to concentrate on two products: fish soup and fish meatballs. Both products were based on locally available fish species that were landed fresh almost throughout the year in Esbjerg.

Before the ‘green’ technology and the waste water treatment facility could be set up, the project ran into financial difficulties, since it was run entirely on public money. These components of the project were also the most expensive ones. The Women's Workers

Union in Denmark had been a powerful ally in securing governmental support. Reduction of unemployment rates and development of sustainable production methods were of key concern to the social-democratic government.

However, for reasons unknown, scepticism towards the future prospects of the women-worker-run plant grew stronger than faith and, in mid-1997, “Dyndspringeren”, as the plant had been named, had to close down. Nobody knows for sure who or what was behind the cessation of funding for the social experiment.

The women, who were unemployed fishworkers before the project began, have once more become unemployed. The lessons they have learned have now become of an individual, rather than a collective, character. They have personally gained experiences with democratic decision-making and non-hierarchical cooperation with experts and consumers, and with working together towards a shared vision.

While the Women’s Workers Union in Denmark stressed the importance of the utopian fish plant, their support failed to see the experiment through to the end. The nature of the lessons the women can draw from the experience will depend on whether the plant’s closure was due to the lack of sufficient political power of the social-democratic politicians or whether it was due to the lack of faith in the viability of the planned fish processing industry. The three researchers have summed up their lessons from the project in reports which will be publicly available, but which are not easily accessible to fishworkers in general.

The traditional fish processing industry has shown some interest in the educational aspect of the project. As technology is now highly automated and technological innovations are expected to grow at a fast pace, education of the remaining workforce is seen as a key factor in facing the competition. The experiences of the women at “Dyndspringeren” force us to ponder whether a participatory approach to management in production will lead to better quality products, or even higher efficiency.

The women’s visions for the fishing industry— across the gamut of capture fisheries, aquaculture, processing, marketing and trade—are of concern to all of us

interested in fisheries and respect for women and nature. Although the light of this project was ultimately snuffed out, it shone long enough to show us a sign of women’s will and efforts to end abuse of human as well as natural resources in industrial fish processing.