

## Farewell, true friend

**Michael Belliveau, Executive Secretary of the Maritime Fishermen's Union, passed away on 26 January 2002 in Moncton, Canada, aged 60**

**I**t is hard to believe—and even more difficult to accept—that Michael Belliveau has bid us a final goodbye. Although far away in the Maritimes, a name and a region he familiarized us with, his close association with us at ICSF sprung from our conviction that his was a firm, clear and committed voice in the sector of the inshore fisheries.

A Canadian woman friend of mine, who had worked in a fishing village outside Trivandrum in the mid-1960s and who had, subsequently, met Mike through her work in Development and Peace, Canada recommended Mike's participation at the founding meeting of ICSF in Trivandrum, India in 1986. Although ICSF has remained, from its inception, an international NGO with a Southern bias, Mike's commitment to the inshore fishery and his sensitivity to development issues were so perceptible that he was requested to be a member of ICSF's first Animation Team. He accepted reluctantly, wondering whether he would be able to do justice to the task.

Having myself had, by that time, almost a decade of experience in mass mobilization work in the Indian fishworkers' movement and being someone with professional training in organization, I found in Mike a trade union leader of a different sort. He seemed to ideally, and simultaneously, blend the aspects of a professional trade organization with those of a political trade union; in India, I had experienced these aspects as running parallel and quite apart from each other.

Although we constantly kept discussing these issues between ourselves and had wild dreams of opening the debate for wider participation through *SAMUDRA Report*, that never happened because of lack of time. It was only years later, in 1999, that both of us, along with Aliou Sall

of Senegal, got the opportunity to sit together for ten days and share our experiences more intensely. Only then did I begin to understand Mike's life-long search for, and commitment to, the issues of the working class. I could only respect and admire the objectivity and integrity with which he worked through issues and tried to find answers.

My other colleagues in ICSF and the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) had told me about Mike's day-to-day life in the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU), of which he was the Executive Secretary. MFU's activities spread over thousands of kilometres in the Maritimes and Mike had to spend long hours on the road to keep in touch with its members. He was convinced about the importance of being close to them, as he believed they were the best judges of how the MFU should forge ahead. When Mike spoke to us about the MFU, he talked about the people in it and its persevering founders, who gave everything they had to make the MFU a representative movement, even as it worked on a shoe-string budget up to the mid-1990s.

I finally got to visit Mike and the MFU only in 2000. That was a troubled period for the MFU, and tension was brewing in several of the coastal communities after the Marshall Judgement. Mike had kept us informed of the issues at stake and, while I was there, I got a better understanding of the problem. Far from 'influencing' me, Mike wanted me to get a first-hand understanding of the problem.

### **Mike's positions**

When his attempts to organize a meeting with the First Nation leaders failed, he accepted that I could meet them through other contacts. It was through this interaction with the First Nation groups

that I understood how, in such a complex social and economic stalemate, Mike's position to accommodate all the rightful interests was based on his profound assessment of the inshore fishery and the possibility of sharing and sustaining this resource both justly and viably.

**I** also realized he was being attacked for his positions. But he continued to hold his ground not just because of personal interest but in the larger interest of the inshore fishers and fishery as a whole. Only years of experience in the fishery and a conviction about social justice could have been the source of such wisdom.

As a member of ICSF and Executive Secretary of the MFU, Mike spared no occasion to deepen solidarity between the fishworkers of the Maritimes and the Southern world. The MFU related very closely with the Collective Nationale du Pecheurs du Senegal (CNPS), trying to understand the issues of the Southern fishworkers and the impact of fisheries access agreements on the South.

The challenging questions that Mike posed to us always made us reflect on our own strategies in organizational work. The aspect that worried him most was that fishworker organizations in the South had not yet moved constructively into management of the inshore fisheries. He firmly believed that it was the fishermen of the Maritimes, through the MFU, who had actually managed and conserved their fisheries, while the 'scientifically' State-managed cod fishery collapsed.

Similarly, on the question of women in fisheries, I admit that I also learnt from Mike's analysis. Initially, I had felt that he was not particularly sensitive to the issue, and I would chide him about it. I tended to think he avoided any discussion on the topic.

In fact, after reading Sue Calhoun's book on the MFU, *A Word to Say*, which he himself had given me in 1989, I asked him whether the fishermen in the Maritimes had any womenfolk at all. He responded: "You're right to ask that question, Nalini. Several women were involved in the struggles of the coastal communities in

the early stages, but they have all disappeared. I don't know why."

While we worked on ICSF's Women and Fisheries Programme, Mike did not get involved—which made me angry. I later realized that he had been attentive to all the discussions and analyses, but could not fit it into his analysis of the evolving fishery.

Nevertheless, through efforts of women like Chantal Abord-Hugon and Maureen Larkin, as women in the coastal communities in the Maritimes and Prince Edward Island (PEI) began to mobilize, they also began to participate in the annual congresses of the MFU and I feel Mike surely had a lot to do with that.

In 1999, we sat down for our long conversation, where we took up the subject again. (*This will soon be published by ICSF as a volume titled Conversations: A Dialogue on Organization, Power and Intervention in Fisheries—Ed.*)

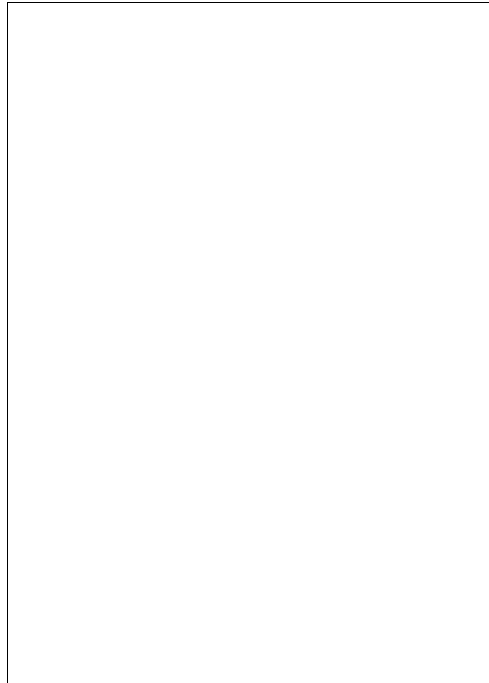
Although we did not arrive at any amicable and clear conclusion, Mike's insights threw enormous light on the process of marginalization of women through the 'professionalization' of the fishery. That helped me to interact more meaningfully with fisherwomen of Atlantic Canada the next year.

Mike was subsequently ready to see that the MFU provided a platform for the women in the Maritimes and PEI to interact amongst themselves, so that they could not only build up solidarity but also come up with strategies to tackle the growing withdrawal of the State, and thus defend the rights of the coastal communities.

Another time when Mike's wisdom sounded caution was during the creation of the World Forum of Fishworkers and Fish Harvesters (WFF). Knowing very well the founding partners of WFF, and being, in a way, responsible for them meeting each other at the 50th Anniversary of FAO, Mike foresaw that any close collaboration between them would be problematic.

#### Issue-based

He had advised that collaboration should be issue-based and that any kind of



structured organization would be premature and unviable.

As the process of globalization draws us closer through common problems in defending our rights against the onslaught of global capital, Mike's absence creates an irreconcilable vacuum.

I mourn the loss of this wise and true friend with a sense of disbelief. I cannot help feeling that his departure, at this particular time, is a tremendous blow to inshore fishers and inshore fisheries the world over. ॐ

This tribute comes from Nalini Nayak (tvm\_nalini@sancharnet.in), a Member of ICSF