

Newfoundland and Labrador

Low value or high value?

Changes in the fishery and in processing technology have affected the nature of the work available to processing workers in Catalina, Newfoundland

by **Bernice Duffett**

Bernice Duffett is from the Bonavista peninsula, on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, Canada. She has been a plant worker for 28 years. She worked for 20 years processing groundfish (primarily cod) and her plant now processes shrimp. She is president of the local union in her plant and is on the women's committee of the FFAW/CAW that represents fish harvesters and many of the processing workers in Newfoundland.

Since 1992, the fishing industry in Newfoundland has gone through a major restructuring in terms of what we fish and the amount of work generated from that fish. The fishery has gone from a lower-value, labour-intensive groundfish industry to a higher-value, technology-intensive shellfish industry.

In 1988, in Newfoundland and Labrador, cod and flatfish fisheries produced catches of 400,000 tonnes. By 1993, these groundfish catches were under 30,000 tonnes. In less than five years, 90 per cent of the Newfoundland and Labrador groundfish base had disappeared—and with it, thousands of jobs. Ten years ago, shellfish made up seven per cent of total landings and less than 30 per cent of landed value. By 1998, shellfish made up about 53 per cent of total landings and 75 per cent of total landed value. The production value of the fishery in 1998 was Can\$750 million. It was expected to exceed Can\$800 million in 1999, despite the continuing crisis in our groundfish fisheries.

One of the biggest problems facing our fishing society continues to be a resource shortage. However, technological change is also an issue. Technology has changed the nature of our work in processing plants throughout the province. Shellfish processing is considerably more automated than groundfish processing. The shift from a labour-intensive groundfish fishery to a technology-driven shellfish industry has resulted in less employment for plant workers, many of whom are women.

In the late 1980s, estimates suggested that about 26,000 people in Newfoundland and Labrador got some employment from the processing sector of the fishery—many of these jobs provided full-time employment, and many of them were held by women. Today, few processing jobs are full-time, and only about 13,000 people (more than half of whom are women) work in the processing sector of the fishery.

My own plant is a perfect example of the changes that have taken place in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. Fishery Products International's Port Union plant used to employ over 1,000 people to process groundfish. We worked full-time, all round the year. This plant was recently renovated for shrimp processing. This meant new ventilation systems, new equipment and a complete reworking of the plant's internal structures, at considerable capital investment. It also meant retraining for the workers. Today, fewer than 200 people work in the Port Union plant processing shrimp for between 14 and 20 weeks a year. Since they tend to have lower seniority than the male workers, women now make up only a small minority of the workers who are still employed in the highly automated Port Union plant.

Some women have disappeared from the paid workforce. Others have moved into boats, working alongside their husbands, brothers or fathers. Women fish harvesters are directly affected not only by the resource shortage, but also by how the resource is shared. The future of women fish harvesters in the industry is tied to a more equal sharing of our fisheries resources.

The main challenge facing our communities is survival. Most of the women in the processing sector of the industry will tell you there is less work and that work is more uncertain. Add to that the cuts to the unemployment insurance system and what we end up with is an economic reality far removed from the policymakers in Ottawa. Therefore, the challenge is to see not just how our coastal communities can survive, but whether there is the political will to ensure that they will survive and prosper.