

**Europe/ France****A winner of battles and hearts**

*A portrait of Jeannette, a fishworker whose life is characterized by buoyancy*

by Roger Cougot, a retired Ouest-France Daily journalist

Lorient, Brittany. No medal, no official address, but warm feelings aplenty and a flurry of friendly greetings. In early 2004, in a corner of the Keroman fishing harbour, where the mist of economic doldrums lingers on, a party is going on to honour a fishworker, one of those women who in the mid-1970s (so long ago!) toiled to raise the local fish trade to uncommon heights.

In those days, fish landings reached 70,000 tonnes a year, three times more than the present figure. At the auctions, there was fish galore to rejoice the traders, loads of *Breiz pesked* (Breton fish) that kept very busy the women who sorted and processed the seafood in the merchants' shops. Jeannette was one such woman.

She is now an 80-year old girlish-looking lady. Most of her lifetime was taken over by the fish trade, and solidly anchored in the cold environment of Keroman, where conditions of work are still reminiscent of 19th century sweatshops. Hands and feet were forever cold, and there was due coldness as well in the trading arrangements, where business was business. Into this atmosphere, Jeannette tried to bring in a measure of warm-heartedness. Quietly and relentlessly, she battled for human dignity and social justice, for added humaneness in that bloody occupation where "the fish always commands".

And that is why her friends threw a party to honour the lady, the fishworker who was never awarded any medal but got covered with fish scales instead. Yet Jeannette maintains her buoyancy.

She was born on 10 January 1924 at Pontivy, in the hinterland, 50 km from the coast. And there was little motivation for her to head for the seashore, except that her grandfather used to board a ship at Roscoff in northern Brittany and cross over to England to sell onions, a 'Johnny' as such people were nicknamed by the British. In 1948, Jeanne Le Tinier, the young lady, born *dans les terres* (in the hinterland) into a family of well-to-do ironmongers, headed for the busy town of Lorient, where the population was coping with the

aftermath of the war bombings, and many were living in spartan wooden cabins.

Just like the river Blavet that flows through her hometown, Jeannette did not take a straight course to the sea. But right from the start, she was bent on working with the lowly (*le milieu populaire*) and engaging in social activism. For a while, she worked with a mothers' help organization, but was soon miffed with the paternalistic approach of its higher-class leaders who hired labour for the sake of charity instead of abiding by the principles of social justice. Jeannette then got a job in a cannery that processed beans, peas and fish. That was before the 'delocalization' spree, when, on the Breton coast, processing plants still needed seasonal workers.

In 1955, Jeannette moved further towards the seashore and the quays of Keroman, where she remained as an *employée de marée* (woman fishworker) until her retirement in 1980, and long afterwards to help those still at work. Throughout her lifetime at the harbour, she stubbornly tried to bring about some improvement in that environment. She joined the union and took part in all its initiatives, however humble and low-key or tense and highly conflicting. But all protest was finally squashed, because at the Keroman harbour the "fish rules", which calls for ten-hour working days at minimum wages!

Later, in 1977, Jeannette joined the sorters and dockers in a protracted battle at the SOPROMER processing plant, which was a precursor of the imminent crisis in the industrial fisheries in Lorient. Though technical inputs (partly financed by the producers, including individual fishermen who paid professional fees) were adequate, the private interests of fish merchants and the appetite for short-term profits prevailed over the need to protect jobs.

Jeannette would extend her care to the women working in the newly established department stores, attempting to develop a true working class culture at the local centre, trying to create a workers' culture among fishworkers, metal workers and employees of all kinds. She extended small gestures at her place of work too: Jeannette must have been the only woman who allowed herself a *pause casse-croûte* (tea break), which at that time was meant exclusively for men.

Jeannette believed—and still does—that something can be done to improve the lot of every woman, of every



person, in spite of all the odds, despite the dirty tricks from bosses and colleagues who, unfortunately, would not mind treading on your feet to suck up to the *petits chefs* (supervisors) for uncertain gains.

In the end, the battles of Jeannette and other women did bear some fruit. After years of waiting, a collective labour agreement has come to life, but, not surprisingly, its implementation remains rather uncertain. Most importantly, there is something less visible, albeit very real: that flicker of hope, that tiny thread of gold, as Jeannette would say, namely, the virtue of human solidarity. For the sake of human dignity, even in times of real hardship and conflict, Jeannette remained buoyant and smiling. Her friends who gathered at that birthday party in a corner of the Keroman fishing harbour would have had no trouble picking the message of a lifetime: *gardez la pêche*, in other words, “conserve your buoyancy”.

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