

## Troubled seas in Loctudy

**The recent Constituent Assembly of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers erupted in an acrimonious East-West divide**

**I**t was intended to be a major step towards international North-South fishworker solidarity. But, instead, the Constituent Assembly of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers in Loctudy, France erupted in an acrimonious East-West divide. Western and Eastern personalities, and their respective agendas, crashed head on, fell apart, and then set off again almost regardless, leaving a trail of wreckage in their respective wakes: upset plans, broken dreams, wounded pride, bitterness and acute disappointment. This article reflects on the fatal course charted at that meeting, linking its destiny to the tragic loss of the French trawler, *An Orient*.

*1 October, Sunday morning, West of Ireland:* In days gone by, a day of rest and, according to local folklore, a day unlucky to be out at sea. For the crew of the Lorient-based trawler *An Orient*, things could not have been unluckier. Shortly after setting their trawl, the boat keeled over and sank like a stone. Of the 11-member crew, only three were saved.

For several days after the loss of *An Orient*, the papers sifted over the key questions: Was the ship seaworthy? Was the weather to blame? Was there a freak wave or some undercurrent? Were the captain and crew competent? Was there a technical fault? Reports were contradictory: vessels fishing in the same area described storm force winds and high seas. However, the surviving crew members said that the state of the sea was not a factor, and that the storm blew up only after the vessel went down. While this had hampered rescue attempts, it had not been a cause of the accident. However, the fact is that, once the boat began to list and get out of control, it went down in only a matter of a few minutes. There was little time for the crew to save themselves. The three

survivors were picked up after more than four hours in the water, all clinging on grimly to a life buoy. (This description is based on reports in *Le Marin*, Friday, 6 October 2000, pages 1,2 and 3.)

*2 October, Monday morning, Loctudy, France.* The following day, at about the same time as *An Orient* had gone down, over 200 participants from more than 30 countries were gathering expectantly for the Constituent Assembly of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF). Before inaugurating the meeting, Forum participants were asked, in emotional tones, to observe one minute's silence to show solidarity and respect for the lost men from *An Orient* and their bereaved families.

Like *An Orient*, the World Forum had set sail in fine weather, with extensive preparations. The French crew, more than anyone else, had worked hard to prepare everything, leaving no detail unattended. The venue had been carefully selected, and for nearly two years, the local team had been working up to this big event. The local dignitaries had been consulted and their support solicited; even the French Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries had agreed to address the meeting. Support had been secured from local, regional, and national French sources, and from the European Union (EU).

### **Broad interests**

Together, professionals and volunteers had worked unstintingly to ensure the success of the venture. Last but not least, the French team had achieved something few other national delegations had achieved. They had brought together a broad spectrum of national fishing interests (local fisheries committees, large and small fishers from the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, women's groups,

and others) in one single organization, 'The French Branch of the World Forum'. For the French, more than anyone else, the stakes in international solidarity were high: personal and professional reputations and national honour had been put on the line.

**Y**et, after only three days into the meeting, a storm blew up that wrecked any chances of the success that the French had worked so hard for. On Thursday afternoon, as the Indians and Canadians struggled to wrest control of the WFF, heated and emotional exchanges ensued. This culminated in a bizarre debate over the number of continents, following which voting took place. As the tide turned against the Indians, chaos ensued, and half the assembly walked out. Unity was on the rocks.

The World Forum had divided into two: Canada, the US, Latin American countries, Iceland and France chose to remain with the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers. The Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, Africans (from Senegal, South Africa, Guinea Conakry, Uganda, Mauritania, Mali, Benin and Madagascar), and New Zealanders, together with the Spanish delegate, abandoned the ship, preferring to embark on the hastily improvised World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP).

As in the sad case of *An Orient*, each group had its own perspective on the dramatic and shattering events that had taken place. But it is worth noting that, as the WFF began to founder, it was mainly a small group of women who rallied round to try to save the ship. Their network is one of the few survivors of the meeting, forming a vital link between the WFF and the WFFP. The other notable survivor is World Fisheries Day, which both the WFF and WFFP will continue to celebrate. Unlike the Constituent Assembly meeting, World Fisheries Day focuses on key issues of mutual concern, rather than on internal power struggles. Thus, within both groups, there is a commitment to work on similar issues and to continue to challenge the dominant model of industrial development, globalized markets, and concentration of ownership. These issues are still key parts of the

constitution drafted in India in 1997, and which remains more or less unchanged for both WFF and WFFP !

But in France, more than elsewhere, people are struggling to understand what happened and why. Did it mean that work on building global unity and solidarity amongst fishing communities had to start again from scratch? Had this set back more than 15 years of work (since Rome in 1984)? Who and what were to blame? Such questions will, and can, never be answered. They may even be counterproductive, hiding a basic reality. True, a division had occurred, but apart from the French and others who had invested so much time and effort, and apart from anger, hurt feelings and pride, what were the real casualties? While some had chosen to remain on the WFF boat, the new vessel that emerged was founded on the same basic principles that had launched the venture in the first place! The hastily drafted WFFP constitution is more or less identical to that of the WFF. In the case of the WFFP, the terms 'fishworker' and 'fish harvester' have been changed to 'fisher people', and there are only five continents, with America forming a single, but conspicuously vacant, block.

The bereavement of the French can be partially explained by their motivation. For many, the WFF had been seen as an exercise in building international solidarity, with a key objective of uniting against outside threats. In this regard, the selection of Loctudy was highly significant. Loctudy is typical of many Brittany fishing ports, with long fishing traditions and associations with the sea. But, above all, for the French, Loctudy had become a symbol of solidarity. In the winter of 1998, one of the worst storms of the century had devastated the port. A solidarity fund was established to assist hard-hit community members. This took as its symbol the black-and-white chequered light beacon at the river entrance.

#### **Natural symbol**

It was, therefore, natural that this symbol of solidarity and strength against the storm be then taken by the French as the symbol of the WFF Loctudy meeting. As explained by André le Berre, President of the Regional Marine Fisheries Committee

and retired owner-operator, “The black-and-white squares symbolize the different problems faced by each of us. In the interests of building understanding and solidarity, we must forget these differences, and unite to spread the light of understanding to all.”

**T**he symbolism was to prove too complex and perhaps unfortunate. Today, the black-and-white squares of the beacon are very clear, but the light no longer functions. Worse, ships must give the beacon a wide berth, or risk running aground. In Loctudy itself, in the interests of providing fish for the French market and earning a living, many local vessel owners are in joint-venture or chartering arrangements with fishing companies in West Africa. Here, their small trawlers fish in direct competition with the local artisanal sector. Hardly international solidarity!

A further contradiction in Loctudy, and a serious one for any world body that attempts to unite professional, commercial and highly modernized fisheries in the North, with small-scale, traditional and subsistence-oriented fisheries in the South, is where to draw the line. Size, power and scale matter! The WFF embraces the concept of artisanal fisheries, which in France and Canada may include trawlers of 25 metres. In many countries of the South (with the notable exception of Madagascar),

artisanal equates with traditional small-scale fisheries, in many cases non-motorized, or, if motorized, using outboard engines. Trawling, a traditional fishing technology in the North is synonymous with industrial-scale fisheries.

In the lead up to Loctudy and in all good faith, the French had tried to open a discussion with the Spanish. The Spanish had questioned the credentials of some of the organizations associated with the Loctudy initiative, asserting that such organizations did not comply with the WFF objectives. For their part, the French had questioned the Spanish fishermen’s support of the Greenpeace campaign to ban drift-nets in European waters. When the Spanish delegation tried to propose a resolution to ban certain kinds of trawling in the Bay of Biscay, the French delegation tried to censure them. This polarized the discussion around trawling, and this Franco-Spanish tiff became a major issue for the Forum.

#### **Issues mixed**

The related issues of gear bans, selectivity, environmental concerns and artisanal fisheries got mixed together, and was used by several delegates for their own political ends. Vested interests hijacked what should have been an open and far-reaching debate to generate political capital for their own relatively narrow interests, and few have escaped untainted.

**I**n the days immediately following the Loctudy meeting, much reflection took place. In many quarters, there is still a feeling of bitterness that so much time, effort, goodwill and money had been wasted; that international solidarity received a slap in the face. The bitterness is particularly apparent in Canada, where many people were shocked, dismayed and deeply wounded by the allegations made against Canada.

Several people had financed their own trips, and their high expectations had not only been dashed, but a slur had also been slapped on their reputations. From India, several voices complained: "We came here to establish an organization, not to wreck it. Why do people see us as the culprits?" But, as some others pointed out, for every accusing finger, there were at least six pointing back. Such personal bitterness will take time to heal.

Others questioned why people had been brought from the four corners of the world, when they could not even agree on whether there are five continents or six! Also, why had so much emphasis been placed on deciding a constitution and launching an international organization when there seemed to be such a radical divergence of views on basic issues, and different perspectives amongst the participants? Others still questioned the interests represented by the various people delegated to the Forum, and the

kind of organizations they were from. The role of the 'Observers' and the 'Auditors', who often played a key role in influencing processes, was further questioned. In the main, these much-discussed questions remain impossible to answer fully.

There has been no impartial evaluation of the various people who came to the meeting claiming to be delegates, nor have the claims of the various organizations to represent national fishworker and fish harvester interests been validated. The interests represented in Loctudy and the organizational credentials have been taken at face value, and on trust.

But trust has been broken, and such questions are now begging to be answered. Similarly, the issue of democracy needs to be addressed, and what democracy really means in such an assembly, where perhaps more than 99 per cent of the world's fishworkers and fish harvesters have no relationship with any of the organizations present.

#### **Questions galore**

For example, should the number of votes in the Constituent Assembly be based on the number of fishworkers in a given region, when most fishworkers remain unorganized? Or should votes be based on the size of the fish catch, particularly in regions where most of the catch is taken by the industrial sector? Or by the length of the coastline, when coastal

communities are often on the margins of mainstream society?

**W**hile such questions of power and structure were hotly debated by several of the men, it is worth noting that a small group of women associated with the WFF initiative (as delegates, observers and auditors) had initiated a process of consultation on issues of mutual concern. They had then developed this dialogue into a proposal for an alternative agenda, and had lobbied hard for a proper discussion on these issues within the Loctudy assembly. Their rationale was that “current systems and practices of fisheries management give little importance to the special concerns of women.” Loctudy would provide “an opportunity to challenge this, and to highlight the importance of communities in the North and the South, and of the people (men and women) who depend on, and support, each other to defend their interests.” They advocated adopting “a community approach that recognizes the importance of both men and women, and promotes the involvement of communities in the negotiating processes with the political and economic powers.”

That such a process was possible was due mainly to the policy adopted by the WFF on parity. However, parity itself was to come under fire in Loctudy, when attempts were made to question the rights of women to participate. It must also be acknowledged that while parity is an important tool for promoting equity, when it becomes an end in itself, it can quickly be transformed into a powerful political tool and become open to abuse.

What happened in Loctudy can only be explained by the processes and dynamics that led up to it. In the words of the surviving captain of *An Orient*, “in such cases, there are often many small things which build up” (Taken from an interview with the skipper in le Marin, on 6 October 2000: “Dans ces cas-là, il y a souvent un tas de petites choses qui s’ajoutent” .)

In New Delhi, India, in 1997, representatives from more than 26 countries agreed to form a World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), with an ‘interim’ charter, membership regime and structure. An

interim Co-ordination Committee (CC) was appointed to carry out ‘regular duties’, with the main task of drafting a constitution. A General Co-ordinator, Thomas Kocherry from India, was elected, and the CC was mandated to meet every three years. A Co-Co-ordinator, François Poulin from Canada, was subsequently appointed.

Cracks began to appear from the outset, giving rise to serious differences within the CC. To begin with, there appeared to be a basic lack of trust between the two key players who had taken the initiative forward, with the Indians and the Canadians vying for control over the WFF. The lack of trust between the Canadian and Indian delegates became further polarized over environmental issues and relationships with NGOs, in general, and with Greenpeace, in particular. This theme ran through all the CC meetings, and finally exploded openly in Loctudy, severely damaging possibilities of unity.

But why couldn’t the Indians and Canadians put their differences aside? To understand this first requires an understanding of the nature of the respective organizations, their style of leadership, and the interests each side had in the initiative.

The Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters (CCPFH) was founded in 1995 for three main reasons: to represent fishing professionals in Canada at the governmental level; to provide a structure for professionalization of the sector; and to act as a national council to plan and implement training for fishing professionals.

#### Terms interpreted

The term ‘professional’ and ‘fish harvester’ also need some explaining. Professional implies an economic motivation, rather than a cultural or social motivation, while ‘fish harvester’ appears to be a term coined from the French ‘*pêcheurs professionnels*’ literally professional fishermen. How and why does *professional fisherman* become translated into *fish harvester*, a term more usually associated with aquaculture? This contradiction aside, the whole rationale of the CCPFH is geared towards the interests of fishing professionals and of

organizational links with the Canadian government.

**O**n the other hand, the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) of India claims to be a “Federation of State-level registered trade unions in India”. It includes “fishworkers, both men and women, working in mechanized crafts and non-mechanized crafts, fish vendors, those working in processing plants, and those working in marine and inland sectors”. The rationale of the NFF has always been one of mass movement and mobilization of people to claim their rights, and to protest against rights violations.

Professional representation and mass movements require very different approaches and styles of leadership. Mass movements require charismatic leadership and unquestioning loyalty. In organizations more geared to professional interests, such leadership is often seen as dictatorial and undemocratic. Professional rights are obtained more through negotiation than through mass protests (there being notable exceptions to this rule, such as the protest actions of French fishermen in 1993 over fish prices, and, in August 2000, over fuel prices).

What brought the CCPFH and the NFF together seems to be the shared view (articulated in the Quebec Statement) that “without the participation of the primary



stakeholders, the international debate on resource management is meaningless.” It was agreed that such participation could only be “achieved through political representation in a global forum of primary stakeholders.” They, therefore, proposed that an international platform be established to:

- campaign against the unregulated and uncontrolled behaviour of industrial fleets, both domestic and international; and
- lobby for the livelihood rights of artisanal and traditional fish harvesters, whose survival is threatened by destructive fishing, overfishing, industrial aquaculture and coastal pollution.

Such concerns united both the mass movements and professional organizations at a time of common threat. The collapse of the cod fishery due to unregulated expansion of the industrial sector in Canada had led to widespread suffering in fishery-dependent coastal communities. In India, the NFF leadership had initiated a protest movement against the Indian government’s deep-sea joint-venture policy. Both organizations saw opportunities in establishing an international body to aid their respective agendas. However, in both cases, the battles had moved on to new territories. In Canada, other fisheries had been developed, and, in the case of India, the deep-sea policy had been withdrawn. What was then left to unite the interests of these two bodies?

Further contradictions exist in the mode of operation of professional organizations in the North and mass-based organizations in the South, and on the power and dependency relations that exist between the North and the South. This has implications for genuine equity in partnership between the North and the South. This became a considerable sticking point between the NFF and CCPFH, and it was noticeable at Loctudy that, while most Northern delegations were complete, several delegations from the South were unable to attend because of financial difficulties or due to visa restrictions. For delegates from West Africa (notably, from Senegal and

## Women's voices

The key issues highlighted by women associated with the World Forum:

- citizenship, professional and political participation, representation;
- sustainable development (sustainable use of resources, addressing the threats that undermine development of community activities);
- working conditions, valorization of skills;
- access to credit;
- destructive tourism, protection of the environment;
- access to health, access to education;

Guinea), this was a particular problem, and explains, to some extent, why the Africans chose to unite with the WFFP, rather than stay with the WFF .

**I**n a separate meeting, African delegates had drafted a four-point statement of concern, which, *inter alia*, demanded greater recognition of the importance of African interests in the WFF, expressed concern about the lack of transparency on financial issues, and noted dissatisfaction with the treatment received from the visa-issuing authorities.

What is it that makes a vessel put to sea despite storm warnings and mechanical failings? On the one hand, fishermen are often under a great deal of financial pressure to make both ends meet. Debt, hungry mouths, and narrow margins push fisherpeople, their skills and equipment to the limit, and often beyond. On the other hand, fishing is based heavily on optimism. Against all odds, weather, costs, faulty and worn-out equipment, fishermen put to sea because there is always the chance of a big catch.

So what was the big catch that the WFF was hoping to land? In particular, why were the Indians and Canadians so hell-bent on establishing a Constitution and an organizational structure that they could control? And, in any case, what can a World Forum really do for fisher people, for improving the real lives of fish

harvesters and fishworkers? With so many unanswered questions hanging in the air, why did so many people and organizations go along for the ride?

The WFF initiative has raised more questions than can be addressed in a short article like this. Furthermore, the answers to many of these questions are likely to be very difficult to deal with, because they expose so many failings. But the fishing sector is riddled with such contradictions and failings. In the case of the French trawler *An Orient*, it turns out that its owners were the supermarket chain, Intermarché, and that it had put to sea without a Navigation Certificate. These facts complicate answers to the questions posed by the bereaved about why the boat was lost. But they must be separated from the real reasons for the vessel's loss. According to the ship's captain, "No one could believe that it was sinking. We were all terrified. There is nothing else to add. It was absurd that it sank." (Taken from an interview with *Le Marin*, 6 October 2000: "*On ne pouvait pas croire qu'on coulait. Tout le monde était pétrifié. Il n'y avait aucun signe annonciateur. C'était absurde.*")

As they prepared for 25 November, World Fisheries Day, it is doubtful that anyone stopped to question what was being celebrated and why. They knew. For coastal communities the world over, life goes on, and the struggles for survival and a better future continue. With or without a World Forum, and whether there be one or more 'world bodies', fishing communities around the World will find ways to express solidarity and unite to make their voices heard. ♣

These personal reflections on the Loctudy meet come from Brian O'Riordan (icsfbrussels@yucom.be), Secretary, ICSF 's Brussels Office