Books
A WORD TO SAY: THE STORY OF THE MARITIME FISHERMEN'S UNION.
By Sue Calhoun. Nimbus Publishing Ltd. Halifax, Nova Scotia. 1991. Pages 274.

From protest to compromise

The complex history of the struggle of the fishermen of the Maritime provinces of Canada is narrated in a thought-provoking style

For those of us who struggle through the process of sustaining a movement of coastal fishworkers in these times of rapid depletion of fish resources, this book on the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU) of Canada, written by Sue Calhoun and titled **A Word to Say**, is both thought-provoking and enlightening.

This is the story of the struggle of the fishermen of the Maritime Provinces to organize to protect the source of their livelihood, while retaining their autonomy. This struggle is situated in the context of the 'development' of fisheries in Canada and the struggle of these communities to retain their Acadian roots.

In this attempt, the author has tried to communicate the complexities of a mobilization process in a community that is geographically scattered and emotionally volatile.

The story focuses on the struggle of in-shore fishermen against the growing control of government over the fishery, on the one hand, and the domination of the fish processing industry, on the other—both of which seemed to want to wipe out the inshore fishery in favour of the growing offshore fleet. Over the years, the inshore fishermen had started co-operatives and joined associations. Neither had given them much strength. In 1973, these fishermen began talking about a union, but the existing labour legislation had to change first.

Only that would legally allow small owners like them to unionize and to have the right to collectively negotiate fish prices. As in all artisanal fisheries, the Canadian-Acadian fishermen have a long history of being exploited by market forces as well as merchants, mainly the French who, in the early 17th century, were trading in dry cod. In the early 19th century, the lobster fishery developed because of demand from the United States (US).

Being bonded to the mercy of the merchants, the east coast fishermen lived from season to season, always in dread of a poor catch that might put them even further in debt. As early as 1854, there were free-trade agreements between the US and Britain which broke the monopoly of merchants but which gave other companies the right to dictate prices.

The first initiatives to free the inshore fishermen were made by Fr. Moses Coady around 1927. He tried to help them create local co-operatives and founded an umbrella organization called the United Maritime Fishermen (UMF). They started with local marketing and later went into processing canneries, mainly of lobster. But their main focus was education.

Decrease in lobster catch

However, by the late 1950s, the UMF was forced to buy its own trawlers to keep its canneries functioning. By the early 1980s, with a decrease in lobster catch, the UMF went bankrupt.

There were various reasons for this collapse. By the mid-1950s, encouraged by government subsidies, a mid-shore fleet developed. It comprised mainly trawlers—vessels between 50 to 100 feet long. In the 1960s, Canada subsidized an offshore fleet to compete with foreign vessels in the North Atlantic. By the early

1970s, one fishery after another began to collapse—first ground fish, then herring and later, salmon.

Prompted by this, the government began to introduce regulations—issuing licences and limiting entry. The co-operatives could not fight these processes. Angry fishermen, therefore, decided to create a union.

None of them, however, knew how a union was organized. A group of them set out for the west coast, at the other end of the country, to find out.

They were disillusioned by what they found none of the unions there comprised exclusively of inshore fishermen, and many received government grants.

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On the other hand, they were also very suspicious of leadership that came from outside. As they were all full-time fishermen and many were semi-literate, they were forced to seek the help of outsiders. But, until someone proved himself, it was always a constant struggle.

Despite all their efforts to pressure legislators, they were constantly let down because the bureaucrats could not accept the fact that small-scale boatowners could unionize.

The government instituted one commission after another to look into the matter. Even though some reports were in favour of granting fishermen the right to unionize, there was always some opposition. The only course left then was to act. The fishermen undertook many collective actions like burning trawlers that came to offload their catch, picketing officials and holding large street demonstrations. Many of these campaigns actively involved women who did most of the organizing work.

It was only in 1975, when the fisheries crisis intensified, that the newly elected fisheries minister, Romeo LeBlanc, began to seriously heed the demands of the fishermen. There was also the question of the 200-mile zone and the ministry was eager to safeguard this right for Canadians.

So it pushed for the organization of a fishermen's association called the Nova Scotia Fishermen's Association (NSFA). This was seen as a kind of 'yellow' union, so by 1977, the militant fishermen went on to organize their own union, the MFU.

Since it took an unambiguous stand on behalf of the workers, the MFU began to be associated with the Left.

Some of its full-timers like Gilles Theriault were indeed inspired by Marxism, and the nature of their commitment to the cause of the fishermen and the manner in which they tackled the authorities gave reason for suspicion and distrust.

Turned out

Sue Calhoun tells us how the MW was once turned out of a worker's meeting hall where it was to hold one of its very strategic meetings—just because word spread that its full-timers were 'communists'. This image derived from its unconventional mass actions and also because the MFU actually represented a new hope as well as a new approach to dealing with problems of the industry. Throughout, the MW adopted a policy of non-alignment with political parties.

Fishermen realised that there was nothing to be gained by publicly supporting any

political party. One big problem the MFU faced was to prove that it had the support of the majority of the inshore fishermen.

In reality, although it did have such support, it was difficult to collect dues from fishermen. Many methods were tried with little success until 1988, when Michael Belliveau made a forceful demand for an *enabling* legislation making dues mandatory.

This clever move finally saved a dying union. Today, the MFU has over 1,500 active members, each paying around US$151 a year.

The occasional successes that the MFU did achieve were not only a result of perseverance and single-mindedness but also due to the entry into the fisheries ministry of committed people, who displayed concern for the working fishermen. In fact, the fisheries minister, Jean Gauvin, was the driving force behind the collective bargaining legislation for inshore fishermen.

It is also interesting to see how the MFU is locked in battle with the state over legislation to protect its rights. Moved by the demands of the MFU, the state formulated bills which really did not answer the demands of the fishermen.

Bill 94 was one such bill which was challenged free of charge on the fishermen's behalf by a labour lawyer called Raymond Larkin. The state found various ways to wriggle around the actual demands of the fishermen. But they did not give in. With the passing of Bill 25, which was in their favour, the fishermen finally won.

The MFU was also involved in issues of resource management which many fishermen considered equally, if not more, important. They felt there was no point in getting a good price if there was no fish to catch. In this case, too, the government played dirty. In restricting access, the licensing system applied to the vessels and not to the fishermen. A fisherman may have had licences for herring, mackerel, groundfish and lobster, but if he wanted to sell one, he had to sell all—along with his boat. There was no flexibility.

The MFU fought this too by defining who a 'bona fide' fisherman was. Any bona fide fisherman could then transfer any licences. This was a major contribution of the MFU to establishing a licensing policy in favour of genuine fishermen.

Problems of poaching were also handled by the MFU, which received government funding to patrol the waters. As a result, the stocks of lobster were gradually regenerated.

Although the union was involved in militancy, it also began to be drawn into the government's consultative process. By the early 1980s, more than 25 Fisheries Advisory Committees had been

established around the region and the MFU had representatives on all of them. In this way, they were often able to negotiate quota increases or season extensions for the inshore sector.

On such occasions, there would be a spurt in the payment of union dues, but they would fall again, as soon as the fishermen had forgotten what the union had done for them. It was a constant up-and-down, with fishermen everywhere asking, 'What has the union done for us?' or 'Why should we continue to fight?

By the early 1980s, the fishermen began to realize they were being listened to. They had started as a protest movement to save the inshore fishery, which seemed to be disappearing. By the mid-1980s, they could claim that they had succeeded.

Gradually, the union had moved away from protest to compromise but it was clear to all that the fishery could not have been managed without the help of the MFU. It is the only union of inshore fishermen separated geographically and ethnically and always with very little money.

In fact, except for three full-timers who remained with the union through thick and thin, a large number left because of insecurity from a lack of funds.

In 1986, for the first time in its history, the MFD negotiated contracts with major companies on behalf of fishermen in New Brunswick.

But collective bargaining has had limited success. The large monopoly houses left the processing industry and only the small ones survived.

The MFU always put principles and ideology ahead of strategy. It was for this reason that it did not affiliate with any international union. It also paid a price for this.

As it stands today, with the fishery again in a major crisis, the MFU can proudly claim to have won all kinds of victories for its fishermen and, more importantly, that it prevented the destruction of its industry—or at least slowed it down.

Many of these issues sound familiar to those of us in developing countries like India. This confirms the fact that resources and inshore fishworkers face the same problems the world over. Moreover, the conviction that it is only the inshore fishermen who can actually manage the resources is a conviction of coastal people at a global level.

As an activist, I enjoyed reading this book. Moreover, I could draw many parallels with our ongoing work in India. However, I regret that Sue Calhoun mentions only in passing the role that women played in the creation of the MFU.

Women's role

I am sure that women did indeed play a very active role and, for various reasons, got left out in the institutionalizing process. Once women lose their spaces in public activity, it is almost sure that subsistence economies also get eroded. Despite the fact that the MFU did continue to put up a fight for the coastal fishers, it probably finds it extremely difficult to offset the increasing capitalization of the sector.

Sue Calhoun has made this complex story come alive by her apparent close contacts with the personalities and main actors in the struggle. Many of us have met some of them too and we can now appreciate them all the more. Bravo, MFU!

This review is by Nailni Nayak, Co-ordinator of the Women in Fisheries programme of ICSF