

# WILL EUROPEAN FISHERIES SURVIVE?

James Smith

It's now almost a month since the French fishermen's Survival Committee decided to tour Europe to make contact with their European counterparts and attempt to establish the basis for common action in the face of the present crisis brought on by an unexpectedly steep fall in fish prices in Europe towards the end of January.

England and Ireland were to be the first ports of call, followed by Spain and Portugal, and then the rest of Northern Europe. Needing an interpreter and consultant for organizing the first leg of the trip, they called on the author of this article at CCFD (The French Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development). There had been frequent interaction between the COFO Maritime Programme and the local fisheries committee at LE GUILVINEC since the 'Bateau pour Madagascar' campaign in 1988 and the ICSF/CCFD symposium in Lisbon in 1989. Rene-Pierre CHEVER was also a participant at the ICSF conference at Bangkok in 1990, and has played an important role in building up a relationship between the French and Senegalese fishworkers. There are few ICSF members or fishworkers from other countries who have not found their way to LE GUILVINEC at some stage, and enjoyed fulsome hospitality there. Of the rest of the Breton delegation, Andre LE BERRE had been several times to Senegal (including to first congress of the National Collective of Senegalese Fishermen in 1991), and Camille GOUZIEN was captain of the old trawler that afforded us such welcome recreation, with wives and children aboard, at the 1992 BREST gathering of tall ships. Together with a young fisherman horn DOUARNENEZ, Georges GUILCHER, it would be fair to say that the conditions were set for the trip to take place in the best possible spirits.

Be that as it may, the afore-mentioned are in the forefront of a last-ditch movement of French fish-workers to make an impression on the European Commission and obtain redress for a fisheries policy which has done little to favour your ordinary local fishworker, but rather the large merchants, processors, and conglomerate fishing operators. In fact, a meeting of 600 fishworkers and their wives just outside LE GUILVINEC the Saturday before the cross-channel trip brought home clearly that the profession is in a state of shock, with as many as 50% bankruptcies in the offing, with concomittent human distress. The anguish and desperation expressed by the women, especially, was very striking. At the same time there was an overall determination

not to allow the meeting to degenerate into personal recriminations against the representatives of the Credit Maritime and other Producers' Organizations present. This hardly masked the general accusation that the traditional bodies mandated to manage the fisheries sector had failed to anticipate the present crisis and were incompetent to provide the kind of political muscle required to make a dent on the awesome behemoth in Brussels.

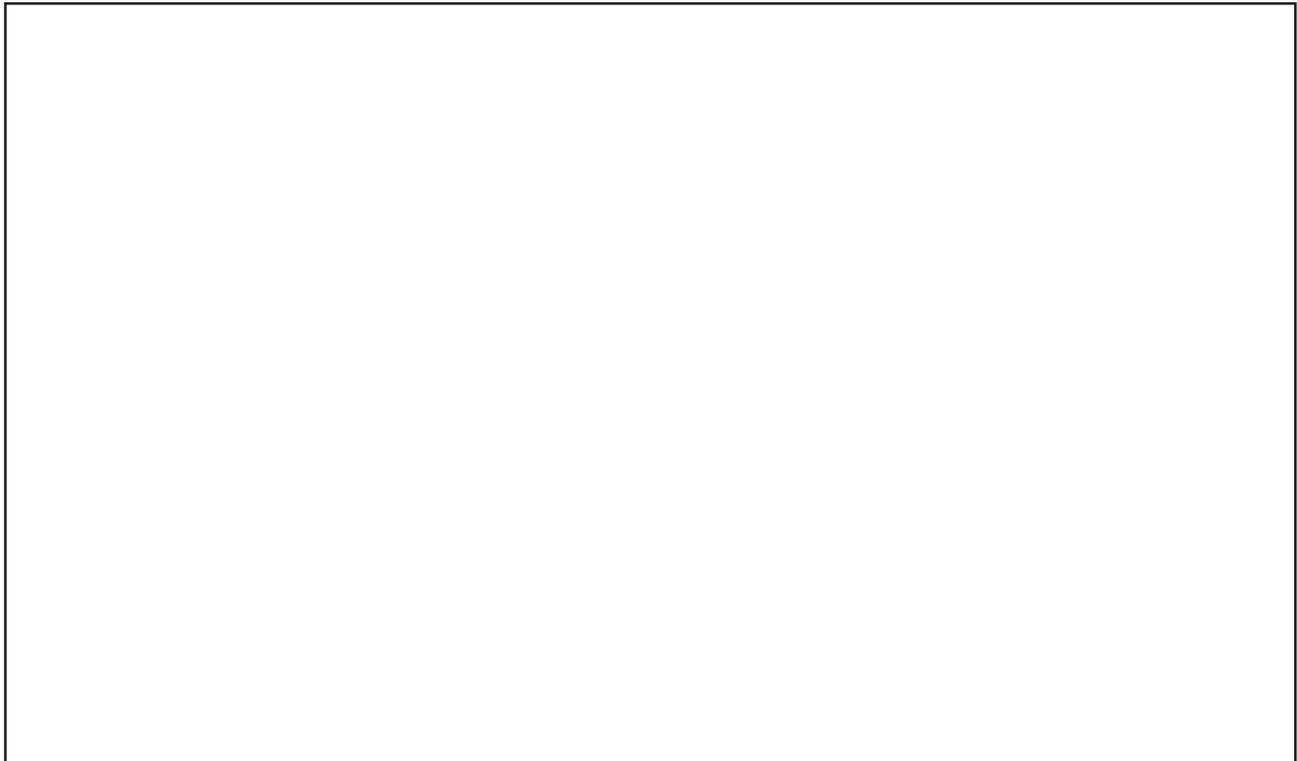
So the sense of mission was a serious one as we set off on the first stage of what could conceivably have been a series of confrontations, the ingredients being complaints over the destruction of British and Irish fish by rampaging French fishermen, liberally doused with the kind of jingoistic anti-French feeling which the British tabloid papers—and even the British government, on occasion—take a delight in stirring up. After all, hadn't a British naval vessel been boarded just two days before off the Channel Islands (Iles Anglo-Normandes), Her Majesty's officers sequestered, and—horror of horrors—the White Ensign burned? By George, there was a time when this sort of thing would have meant at least a good keel-hauling, or being thrashed to within an inch of the wretch's life before being handed back to a shame-faced French admiral with a stern warning. Or worse, perhaps, Alas, we would have to be content with the British fisheries minister stating in a televised parliamentary address that, if he had his way, he would send in the SAS (Special Air Service), "and it wouldn't be against British fishermen" (hear, hear! hear, hear!).

The first port of call was a popular 680 television programme called 'Kilroy'. There were about 60 people on the set which had been carefully organized so that potential antagonists could have a good old go at each other. And so it started "Are the British fishermen your enemies?", Camille was asked. "Not at all", said he, with a refrain that we were to hear often over the next 4 days the destruction of British fish was generally accidental, or the result of disputes being settled between French merchants and French fishermen there was no desire to hurt European Community fish, but rather to obtain regulation of extra-community cheap imports. After all, when 2000 French fishermen had descended on the Rungis central market outside Paris on a night that will remain engraved in peoples minds for many a year, not so say in a song or two, between 80 and 90% of the fish encountered was from outside the Community.

There were a few well-placed remarks about how the Common Fisheries Policy quota system allows the French to take 3 or 4 times as much fish off Cornwall than the Cornishmen themselves, but generally speaking, one had the impression that the large majority of the audience had not come to add fuel on to a mostly contrived Anglo-French fish war. After about 5 minutes, Robert Kilroy went upstage and asked a fisherman's wife what she thought of the French fishermen's behaviour. In answer, she turned the guns inward, so to speak, pointing straight at the British Conservative M.P. present, Mr Gary Streeter. In substance, she said "The French did what was required to attract attention to the plight that we all share, and

- the British government was about to implement a Fish Conservation Act which would unilaterally reduce fishing effort by British fishermen, without compensation, while the French and others could safely continue fishing the same stocks...

Poor brave Mr. Streeter, there was not much that his one year's experience in the Commons as a well-groomed young Conservative back-bencher could do for him, when a fisherman's wife had actually seen him support the Fish Conservation Act in a public meeting. Gone was all hope of deniability' here I Such that the British lion in him could let out no more than a petulant whine. He said, yes, he thought the govern-



which the British government has done nothing to relieve".

From then on, it was all a Britannico-British affair, as the French would say- At the end of the programme, Kilroy encouraged the audience to congratulate Mr. Streeter on his courage in attending it, as he did indeed come in for a lot of hometruths. At times, all hell was let loose, with cries of 'rubbish' reverberating around the set, Kilroy having some trouble in keeping the epithets just on the decent side of 'imbecile'. It all came out, one might say:

- the British government had sold the British fishing profession down the river at the time of the Icelandic Cod War, and were now allowing cut-rate imports from Iceland which corresponded to the quotas that could have been fished by British fishermen who had traditionally been fishing them before the Cod War

ment should consider arming British patrol vessels. And you know, you people - (from the lower-decks that should know your place) - have done your cause a lot of harm with the British public by blocking the port of Plymouth. The trouble is, there are too many fishermen chasing too few fish, etc, etc.

And what about the flagships, Mr. Streeter? (60 Spanish vessels are allowed, with approval from the International Court at the Hague. to fly the British Red Ensign and fish British quotas). How did the British government limply allow that to come about? Where was the indignation which we have come to expect when it comes to contempt for the sacrosanct Union Jack?

The trouble is, we're just not in the nineteenth century any more. Attempts to deny the ordinary fisherman a responsible role in fisheries resource management are nothing but inglorious. The praise of 'rigid discipline' in

the British maritime tradition that we were taught at school surely has to be tempered with the fact that management of a finite resource requires a participative approach.

All in all, this television programme was useful, because it set the scene for what was to come during the next three hectic days. Our private plane, piloted by a meticulous Biggles-type character, took us to Grimsby, Castletownbere (Co. Cork, Ireland), Dublin, Haverfordwest (near Milford Haven), and finally Plymouth, before returning to Quimper. On each of our stops, the importance of the French market for British and Irish fish was always stressed, and more disciplined demanded of the French comrades. But the desire to find common ground for a joint European fishermen's platform in their struggle with Brussels was sincerely shared.

On the market issue, there was consensus on the need for its regulation as a sine qua non of resource management, a problem which fishermen could seriously address at a later stage. The French feel that there needs to be firm action to regulate the entry of fresh fish into the EEC, which represents only about 10% of total imports and is the crucial item if local fishermen are to survive. A reference price should be fixed at a higher level than the price at which locally-produced fish are withdrawn from the market. The British, represented by Richard Banks of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations in Grimsby, would also want to impose import quotas of frozen fish for each country, in an attempt to stop illegal imports arriving in the EEC via member states. Actually, the British would want market regulation to include quantity restrictions, strict quality standards, and reasonable tariff barriers of 15% (which compares to the 5% allowed in a current joint venture fishing agreement between the EEC and Argentina).

Despite the undoubted goodwill, there is obviously difficulty in achieving consensus within the European fishing profession on the proposals to be made to the Council of Ministers in Brussels, which was felt to be the crucial channel for possible change. The Spanish, Italians and Greeks, in particular, are vociferous in their claims for favourable import quotas, since it is largely their firms that are responsible for fishing them in foreign waters. On the other hand, the Irish and British, at least, have little chance of taking up access rights negotiated by the EEC in third country waters, as their boats are too old. Besides, processors and merchants throughout the EEC require the imports in order to provide the 50% of the total European consumption of 12 million tons that are not covered by production in European Community waters. Low prices for imports, it is often felt by European producers, override the need to maintain quality standards.

One can also get quickly bogged down in technocratic

considerations and end up trapped in a 'catch-22' situation the European Commission has instituted rules that it is loath to change, such as 'autonomous import quotas without reciprocal rights'. After all, the EEC agreement with the Argentine was only signed last November.. .so how can one now go back on what was decided regarding the 5% barrier allowed on a quota of 120,000t of hake? The Commission is equally loath to institute serious import controls, which means that up to a third of fish imports enter the Community illegally in one way or another. When challenged, the Commission can always say that it has not been provided with the kind of up-to-date data by member states which could justify controls, especially as the GATT acts as a discouragement of market regulation.

The Commission is both rigorous and academic in its management of procedures, while being lax and unscrupulous and open to all sorts of political pressure when it comes to formulating policy. For instance, the EEC-Senegal fisheries agreement which was being debated in the European parliament at the time this article was written had already been sealed with a 16 million ECU payment to the Senegalese government, just before the presidential elections in Senegal got under way..

As long as the European market is provided with fish, while safeguarding European deep-sea fishing capacity, it appears that fish stocks control in Third country waters and defense of European fishing communities are secondary considerations.. When it comes to the crunch, what does the European housewife care about the predicament of European fishermen, as long as she is getting food at the lowest possible price (which means that fish could be competing with substitutes such as chicken, minced meat, pork, etc)?

Nevertheless, aided by the present recession, the fact remains that we are witnessing the worst crisis in the European fishing sector since the European Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was first drafted. While mass bankruptcies loom as an inevitable occurrence within the next few months among European fishermen, their indictment of the CEP is a scathing one:

- ruin for the European producers, for the sake of a free market
- failure in regulating fish-stocks, especially as the present crisis is forcing European fishermen to fish more to compensate for lower prices
- a distorted 'foreign policy', since not only has the encouragement of fishing in third country waters (at vast expense to the European taxpayer) done little to reduce fishing effort in European waters, but it is encouraging the influx of cheap imports from abroad without doing much that is positive for the development of fishing capacity by Third World



operators. Nor is it really providing inexpensive fish to the European housewife.

Which brings us back to the purpose of the European tour by the French fisherman's Survival Committee, as well as to the 'raison detre of such a committee. It was frequently said during the tour that the existing professional organizations, such as EUROPECHE or the Association of European Producers' Organizations, seem to be too biased towards industrial fisheries, too divided, or too lacking in mandate, to come up with common solutions.

The official producers' organizations, set up by Brussels in the first place, don't seem to be much more than instruments of management, and it is no wonder that fishermen all over Europe are convinced that their interests are not being properly represented. In France the unions are politicized and have little more than 5% representation among the fishing profession skippers and crew appear as members of the same unions... There was a concensus that solutions to the present crisis could only come if efforts were made by European producers to apply pressure on their respective governments to defend common positions at Council of Ministers level on market issues, and, in cases connected with resource management, to achieve recognition of solutions negotiated by the producers themselves.

Hence the need for more spectacular action by European fishworkers, and the possibility of extending the Survival Committee to the whole of Europe was mooted... We have surely not seen the last of port blockages and other mass demonstrations, organized on a national or international basis. Clearly, this is not quite the British or Irish cup of tea, but they appeared to be prepared to go along with it. There was some call for advice from the French on mobilization techniques for instance, the British and Irish were interested to learn that the French had made every effort to keep fishing, while at the same time instituting a system, which enabled fishermen to be active in the Survival Committee during the periods spent on land between fishing campaigns.

The fleeting visit to South-West Ireland provided one very visual example of what artisanal fishing communities are having to face on a world-wide basis. This was the awesome sight of the 'klondikers' anchored in Bantry Bay upwards of 30 Russian and perhaps Polish factory ships, each with about 120 workers on board, processing pelagic fish fished by European fishermen for sale in the Third World. These 'klondikers' were apparently hired by 3 British companies. The Irish fishermen were resigned to their presence, in the hope that they brought temporary stimulus to the local economy, but there was a sneaking feeling, freely ad-

mitted but scarcely fathomed, that somehow the 'klondikers' were undermining their survival in a round-about way. On this score, could the recent Chilean fisheries law, which bans foreign factory ships from coming within 120 miles of the coast, perhaps provide a pointer or two?

There was a fitting end to our journey as Biggies treated

us to a nostalgic sight by swooping down low over the brightly-lit Cinq Ports of Penmarch, St Guenole, Lesconil, Loctudy, and Le Guilvinec. Arguably the best-run and most prosperous ports in Europe, with not a little help from the government and even from Brussels. All the result of 50 years of fighting spirit, the stubble-chinned and ragged-clothed fisherman but a memory on a faded postcard. And what now? ■

