European fishing industry in crisis

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The European Union (EU) agreed in December to major cutbacks in catch quotas for the North Sea fishing industry. From February 2003 additional limits will be placed on the amount of fish caught by North Sea trawlers, and those boats catching the most endangered species will have the number of days they can go out to sea each month reduced to 15.

The EU claim the reductions will help overfished species replenish, but the quotas have been set at levels designed to allow the largest fishing concerns and the fish processing industry to continue making profits. The scheme will come at the price of thousands of jobs losses among small-scale owner operators, their crews, and associated on-shore workers.

Cod quotas are to be cut by 45 percent, haddock by 50 percent and whiting by 60 percent. Less endangered species such as plaice and sole will be covered by smaller quota reductions.

As many as 50,000 jobs in the industry could be lost in those countries with North Sea fishing fleets, with the fishing industry in Britain especially badly hit. In north-eastern Scotland where there are three of Europe's largest fishing ports, Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Aberdeen, there will be major social and economic repercussions. Aberdeenshire Council have estimated that the EU quota cuts will result in 7,000 job losses in their area.

Fishing leaders have warned that the quota cuts will be met by protests including major blockading ports, and many individual boat owners have vowed to continue catching fish illegally.

Fishermen's groups in Britain are seeking over £100 million in compensation for lost revenues coming as a result of the quota cuts, but government sources have indicated that any compensation would fall substantially short of this. Scottish Labour spokesman Bill Spears, speaking on the BBC's Holyrood programme, suggested that redundant fishermen should be grateful that they would have the opportunity to find work in call centres.

The EU regulates commercial fishing in its member states' waters, putting quotas on the amount of each species that can be caught in a season. These latest changes in regulations are the largest cuts in quota since the system began in the 1960s. EU Farm and Fisheries Commissioner Franz Fischler said that such drastic cuts were necessary to avoid the extinction of several types of fish from the North Sea. "I am perfectly happy we managed to agree [to] the drastic cuts and at the same time a multi-annual programme to insure that stocks recover," he said.

However, it is far from clear that the agreement will be able to secure a sustainable future for fishing in the North Sea. According to EU scientists, North Sea cod stocks have fallen to a level so low as to put the survival of the species at risk in the region. Haddock and whiting were also found to be suffering from overfishing. On the basis of their scientific advice the EU had initially called for quota cuts of up to 80 percent for these species.

The final agreement means that quota cuts fall well short of those recommended by EU scientists. Environmental groups such as the World Wildlife Fund have warned that the proposed reductions in fishing cannot secure a long-term future for white fish such as cod.

Germany and Denmark, both countries with North Sea fishing fleets, refused to sign up to the EU agreement, warning that tougher conservation measures were needed. German fisheries minister, Renate Kuenast, said, "It is ... clear that on the basis of scientific evidence, in particular about cod stocks, this was not enough for me.... I have a sense of how difficult it will be to build up stocks again."

There are many involved in European fishing that are conscious of the effects of uncontrolled overfishing,

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having taken note of the events that took place in Canada in 1992 when white fish stocks off the coast of Newfoundland collapsed, with the loss of over 30,000 jobs.

Many of the smaller boats trawling for white fish have been failing to fill their existing quotas for several seasons. Average crew earnings on British boats less than 24 metres in length have fallen from £23,000 in 2000 to just over £13,000 in 2002.

Franz Fischler and the governments of EU fishing nations are aware of the risks to both the industry and the marine environment of failing to adequately control fishing. Despite this the EU has chosen to partially ignore the advice of their scientists, and impose quota cuts primarily driven by the immediate needs of capital. Only the naive could think the decision was motivated by a desire to save the jobs and communities that rely on North Sea fishing. Rather, the EU has passed fishing controls that cut quotas to a sufficient extent to drive hundreds, if not thousands of small- to medium-scale fishing businesses to ruin. This will leave the wealthiest owners of multiple trawler fleets and the larger factory ships able to exploit the resources of the sea without having to compete with their smaller rivals.

Fish harvesting and processing industries reliant on the North Sea are estimated to have an annual turnover of more than $2 billion, and contribute to a worldwide trade worth approximately $40 billion a year. The huge natural resources of the seas have come to be dominated by millionaire trawler operators working to supply multinational food companies such as IAWS Group, owners of United Fish Industries (UK) Ltd., and Agrilink, owners of Birds Eye Fish. It is in the service of these forces that EU policies are made, with scant regard for the livelihoods of the majority of those reliant on the fishing industry.

Fishermen's representatives in Britain such as the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF) have responded to the EU reductions by issuing chauvinistic denunciations of fishermen from continental Europe. Alex Smith, president of the SFF, said that the EU was "placating the Dutch, French and Belgian fleets by allowing reasonable reductions for their mainstay catches which will allow their fleets to survive while we will be driven to bankruptcy" and called for the implementation of national protectionist measures to defend British fishing interests.

Such a reactionary policy can only lead to a fratricidal struggle between European fishermen that will do nothing to defend jobs, much less preserve stocks. A genuinely international approach to fish supplies is needed, based on scientific planning that can provide a long term future for both those whose livelihoods depend on fishing and the natural environment.

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