

Newfoundland fishers consider disaffiliating from Unifor

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Representatives of the upstart Federation of Independent Sea Harvesters of Newfoundland and Labrador (FISH-NL) applied to the provincial Labour Relations Board on Dec. 30 to certify a breakaway union for the province's inshore fish harvesters. Currently, the fishers are organized by the Fish, Food and Allied Workers (FFAW), which is an affiliate of Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union.

A subsequent January 9 press release from FISH-NL claimed that 2,372 fish harvesters have signed cards supporting the new union. As inshore fishing is a seasonal activity, FISH-NL leaders cited official unemployment insurance claims to argue that they have the support of more than half of the active inshore fishers currently organized by the FFAW-Unifor.

FISH-NL has hotly contested FFAW's claims to represent 10,800 inshore fish harvesters. It has accused the Unifor affiliate of refusing to provide the dissidents with a membership list and inflating its figures by including retirees and workers no longer active in the industry.

In order to force a union representation vote, the new union must produce signed membership cards from at least 40 percent of the active FFAW inshore membership.

As opposed to the offshore "factory ship" fleets, which are owned and operated by large corporations, inshore fishers are often family enterprises, with boats restricted to no more than 65 feet in length. Crews generally number less than five people per boat. The vessels are owner-operated, although many boat owners are at least partly financed by onshore fish processors.

FISH-NL's bid to form a breakaway union has been fueled by a growing revolt by thousands of FFAW members against their own union leadership, which they charge has come to resemble a "salt water mafia." At more than 40 meetings across the province over the past three months, inshore fish-boat owners and crew members denounced FFAW-Unifor for gouging the membership with exorbitant dues, fees and levies, misappropriating funds, colluding with the federal government and riding roughshod over basic democratic principles in order to further the business interests of the union bureaucracy. A YouTube posting of angry fishermen confronting a Unifor official in Clarenville shows the depth of the bitterness amongst the membership.

Similar accusations can, of course, be leveled against the ossified, pro-capitalist union apparatuses around the world. In Canada, one simply needs to harken back a few months to the blatant sellout the well-heeled Unifor bureaucracy engineered of

23,000 autoworkers in Ontario in contract negotiations with the Detroit Three. In the face of unprecedented rank-and-file opposition, the union surrendered defined benefit pensions for new hires, agreed after a decade-long wage freeze to a further cut in real (inflation-adjusted) wages, and further entrenched the hated two-tier wage system, under which it takes new workers more than a decade to earn the regular wage.

Fishers have cited many examples of the FFAW apparatus feathering its own nest at the expense of the workers it purports to represent. In a particularly telling case, the Newfoundland Supreme Court recently upheld a complaint by dissident FFAW members, finding that the union had "failed in its responsibilities to fishermen" by secretly negotiating a deal with provincial energy conglomerate Nalcor.

The court heard that to compensate fishers for the loss of scallop grounds due to a new undersea power cable, Nalcor agreed with union officials to set aside \$2.6 million. Only then did the union approach fishers for permission to "negotiate" even though the deal had already been struck behind the backs of the membership. The union subsequently announced that compensation would be paid out over a 30-year span (even though no such withholding provision had been stipulated) and that therefore the union would need to take for itself some \$400,000 in fees to administer the fund. The court ordered the union to fully pay the affected members within 30 days. Using members' dues to pay for its legal costs, the FFAW bureaucracy is now appealing that decision.

A significant portion of the union's income comes from its control of the Fish Harvesters' Resource Centre, a not-for-profit company created in 1993 to verify fish landings. Fees from fishers are levied to directly fund the company. But over a ten year period, some \$5.7 million was then paid by the company directly to the FFAW for "research fees." Fees and levies on fishers are a particularly sore topic. Last year the FFAW secretly proposed an additional 5 cent per pound levy on lobster harvesters to cover the union's "management" of the fishery.

In another case cited by angry FFAW members, the union, alongside seafood processing companies, but without any input from fishers, agreed with the federal government on a new Northern Cod Management Plan with far-reaching implications for quotas, licenses, prices and sustainable fish stocks. Despite numerous requests, the union refused to release a copy of the plan to its members. Said FISH-NL leader Ryan Cleary, "The FFAW is a disgrace, choosing to consult with fish processors while ignoring

its own membership. The union is more concerned with creating markets for processors to obtain record profits while harvesters continue to receive pennies on the pound.”

The drive to disaffiliate from the FFAW has met with hysterical resistance from the official labour movement. Canadian Labour Congress president Hassan Yussuff denounced the FISH-NL initiative as an unwarranted “raid” instigated by the personal ambition of its leader, Ryan Cleary. Newfoundland Federation of Labour President Mary Shortall, who herself has served on the Board of the Fish Harvesters Resource Centre, has backed the FFAW. Lana Payne, Atlantic Director of Unifor, called Cleary a “narcissist and liar.” After a heated fishers meeting, where a member denounced the union and said the bureaucrats should be “placed in front of a firing squad” for their treasonous behavior, FFAW officials called in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The grievances of the inshore fishers of Newfoundland are real. Unifor-FFAW does in fact operate as a business in a naked conflict of interest with its own membership. But the mere creation of another union will not redress the plight of fish workers in the province.

Aside from the general demand for transparency, a central plank of FISH-NL is to open up the seafood market to buyers from outside the province. Currently, Newfoundland inshore fishers, forced to sell only to local processors, receive some of the lowest prices for their catches on the continent. A free trade in fish products will almost certainly result in increased layoffs of the already impoverished onshore fish plant workers in Newfoundland and, in step with the dictates of the capitalist market, lower the incomes of fish harvesters outside the province as a result of the increase in supply.

The organizing drive of FISH-NL excludes fish plant workers and the workers employed on the larger corporate-owned trawlers and factory ships that take an outsized proportion of the fish stock.

The total decimation of Newfoundland’s world renowned cod fishery in the latter part of the 20th century, which led to a region-wide moratorium after 1992 and the impoverishment of tens of thousands of fish harvesters and plant workers, shows that sectional and regionalist tactics cannot begin to address the broader questions that assail the livelihoods of those who labour in the seafood industry.

Such tactics can only lead to a fratricidal struggle amongst seafood workers that will do nothing to defend jobs and improve the livelihoods of fish industry workers, much less preserve stocks.

Rather, what is required is a genuinely socialist and internationalist strategy to forge the fighting unity of fish industry workers in Canada and around the world against the corporate giants and big business governments. Only by placing the industry under public ownership will it be possible to develop the fisheries, using scientific planning, as a public resource, providing food for people around the world and a secure job long-term for those whose livelihoods depend on fishing, while safeguarding the natural environment.

FISH-NL President Cleary does not see it that way. As late as 2008, Cleary floated the idea of Newfoundland separating from the Canadian state—a tactic that would only serve to further pit workers in the province against their class brothers and sisters abroad. But

Cleary soon abandoned that perspective in favour of a broader nationalism epitomized in the policies of the trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP). Elected in 2011 to the federal parliament as an NDP member, Cleary subsequently lost his seat to the Liberals in 2015 and within weeks flipped to the province’s big business Conservative Party, standing unsuccessfully in that year’s provincial election. In countering the current organizing drive, the Unifor bureaucrats have used Cleary’s careerism and right-wing politics as a means to attack the legitimate grievances of FFAW members.

In 1987, seafood workers in Newfoundland broke away from their former union—the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)—to form the FFAW. Today, on the Unifor-FFAW website, the union cynically heralds their own raid on the UFCW membership as follows: “The UFCW treated their members as chattels, waging a campaign of vilification against the leadership of the union in Newfoundland and frustrating the democratic wishes of the membership through endless litigation.” History now repeats itself. But it is not a question of bad personal leadership or a swap of one union for another.

While the unions have always accepted the inviolability of capitalism and sought to restrict the working class within the narrow confines of collective bargaining and parliamentary reformism, they were in an earlier period often associated with significant social struggles and did to some degree defend the daily needs of workers.

However, in the last two decades of the 20th century the unions ceased to function even as defensive organizations of the working class. They rejected—as attested by the virtual cessation of strikes—any connection to the class struggle, embraced economic nationalism, and adopted a policy of collaborating with the corporations and government in cutting the wages and benefits of their members. The same process has unfolded among trade unions in every part of the world. The basic cause of this transformation was not the subjective characteristics of union leaders, but profound changes in world economy—above all, the globalization of capitalist production.

Whether as members of a new union or continuing within the FFAW, fishers must build their own independent rank-and-file committees and base their struggle on the essential understanding that their struggle, like that of all workers, is a political one. The battle by workers to defend their livelihoods must be combined with the fight to build a mass political movement of the working class, independent of the capitalist parties and the subservient union bureaucracies, and committed to the fight for socialism and real equality.



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