

Scottish government threatens to seize Irish fishing vessels

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12 June 2019

Rockall, hundreds of miles from Iceland, Ireland and the UK in the North Atlantic Ocean, is the only point of an elevated area of continental shelf that appears permanently above sea level. The granite islet is just over 17 metres of near vertical rock in height, 33 metres in diameter, is uninhabitable save by molluscs and a few seabirds, and frequently overwhelmed by enormous waves.

Nonetheless, the fishing grounds around it are rich in haddock and squid and have become the latest Brexit-related flashpoint between Britain and the European Union (EU) in the form of a spat between Scotland and Ireland.

Last week, the Irish government received a formal letter of notice from the Scottish government's minister for external affairs, Fiona Hyslop, threatening "enforcement action" against Irish fishing vessels found to be operating within 12 miles of Rockall. Hyslop made clear she intended to dispatch fishery protection vessels to the area.

Fergus Ewing, the Scottish minister for the rural economy, indicated that Irish fishing vessels refusing to "cease and desist" from fishing "would be boarded and action taken in accordance with law." In response, the Irish government insisted there was "no basis for excluding Irish fishing vessels from the Rockall waters, as they are legitimately pursuing EU fishing opportunities in these waters and have done so unhindered for decades."

Tánaiste (deputy premier) and foreign minister, Simon Coveney, told the press, "We have never recognised UK sovereignty over Rockall and accordingly we have not recognised a territorial sea around it either."

Agriculture minister Michael Creed said that the Dublin government was prepared to take the matter to

the EU courts.

Rockall's status has long been contested. The volcanic plug was first claimed by the British government in 1955 to prevent the islet being used by Soviet observers of British missile tests from the island of South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. Britain formally incorporated Rockall into the Scottish county of Inverness in the Island of Rockall Act of 1972, following attempts the previous year to install a light beacon on the islet's summit.

The move was designed to reinforce British rights to whatever mineral resources might lie underneath the seabed. The Irish government, however, has never accepted the British claims, which were undermined by a 1982 United Nations convention on the law of the sea. The convention ruled that "Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf."

In consequence of this, control of the seafloor has continued to be contested between Iceland, Denmark (whose Faroe Isles are hundreds of miles northeast), Ireland and Britain. At stake are mineral rights in the Hatton Rockall basin—a huge area of seafloor over 160,000 square miles in size, which, over one kilometre under the ocean surface, is potentially rich in oil and natural gas.

In 2007, a carve-up between the four contestant states was reported to be close but no agreement was ever reached. Difficulties in exploiting the region on account of deep-sea environment, the unknown quantities of recoverable resources, along with growing awareness that the basin is itself a unique and fragile area of ocean floor, host to unusual species, have restricted commercial exploration.

Fishing rights within the immediate 12-mile radius of

Rockall, are only contested by Britain and Ireland. While a number of vessels from both countries exploited Rockall waters, the fact that Ireland failed to accept British control of Rockall did not appear to cause problems as both were EU members and Britain did not attempt to enforce its claimed 12-mile limit. The entire North East Atlantic area is covered by various agreements, including the EU's Common Fisheries Policy.

All this changed with the Brexit vote of June 23, 2016. Although the Scottish population voted 63 to 37 percent to remain in the EU, significant constituencies involved in the fishing industry voted to leave on the basis that Scottish-based vessels would now be unrestricted by EU-imposed fishing quotas, while EU boats would be barred from UK waters.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) administration in Edinburgh, despite its own intense opposition to Brexit, is keen to present itself as standing up for its powerful fishing industry lobby.

The Irish government has asserted that from early 2017 its Scottish counterpart began to raise complaints about Irish vessels fishing "illegally" around Rockall. These were opposed by the Irish authorities whose position "has been and remains that the waters around Rockall form part of [European] Union waters under the Common Fisheries Policy, to which the principle of equal access for the vessels of all EU member states applies."

The dispute seems certain to escalate. Fishing industry federations in both countries are following their governments in taking diametrically opposed positions.

At stake is far more than the lucrative haddock stocks around Rockall. Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation's CEO Sean O'Donoghue warned earlier this year of the scale of disaster facing Irish vessels. He explained "all of the important commercial fish stocks which we rely on are shared with the UK and approximately one third of all landings of fish by Irish vessels come from UK waters."

Fear of a disorderly Brexit meant that the entire Irish industry was "standing on the edge of a precipice and everything that we have strived for and developed for generations is staring into the abyss."

Speaking this week O'Donoghue warned, "If there is an enforcement by the Scottish authorities we will

rigorously defend [our fishing] and we expect and we believe that the Irish Government will fully support in that action."

The strongly pro-Brexit Scottish Fisheries Federation (SFF) CEO Bertie Armstrong backed the stance from Edinburgh, insisting that "the Scottish Government is right to impose compliance, full stop. But at a time when we are moving towards independent Coastal State status it lays down a benchmark for the future."

The Rockall dispute comes after the "Scallop Wars" of late 2018 that saw French and British scallop fishing vessels ramming and lobbing rocks and smoke bombs at each other in disputes over scallop fishing in the Bay of Seine.

Underlying both disputes is the extent to which Brexit is threatening to plunge Europe-wide fish conservation and management measures into chaos. With EU fleets facing exclusion from the UK's extensive coastal waters and vice versa, the tendency will be for every fleet to grab whatever it can. This will cause fish stocks, already threatened by overfishing and climate change, to collapse, as has already happened in the Mediterranean.

Both cases point to the irrational and outmoded character of the nation-state. Fish, it goes without saying, recognise no national boundaries, and conservation of stocks is impossible on a national basis. But such is the dead-end that British and European capitalism have reached, incapable of improving the lot of the vast majority of the working population, including the many millions dependent on the fishing industry, that neither can offer anything but mutual ruination. The Rockall fishing crisis points once again to the necessity of a united socialist Europe.



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