

# French fishing crisis sparks social unrest

by Katherine Notley

*This article was adapted from a report in the French weekly Nouvelle Solidarité by Marc Jolivald.*

The French fishing industry, which employs 120,000 people, is on the verge of total collapse, and the crisis has turned into one more flashpoint of social explosion.

During a Feb. 5-6 visit to the city of Rennes in Brittany, France's prime Atlantic fishing province, Prime Minister Edouard Balladur was confronted by the sight of fishermen protesting foreign dumping being driven back by tear-gas in the public square where he was speaking. The Feb. 10 issue of the weekly *L'Événement du Jeudi* lampooned Balladur's efforts at appeasing the fishermen, whose livelihoods he had destroyed by opening the door to free trade under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT): One cartoon showed "Captain Balladur" piloting his ship out of the storm and declaring, "The worst is behind us," as the stern fills up with water. A second shows him pouring water into a half-full fishbowl whose only inhabitant is a fish skeleton.

Between Jan. 1 and Feb. 1, 1994, the sale price of sole dropped by 27%; whiting dropped by 31%. In a protein-starved world, one-third of France's catch is unsold and must be destroyed or ground into fish meal. Forty percent of the fleet is in debt. Recently the government announced \$51 million in subsidies, of which half are credits. It is also moving to reduce 50% of the social security withholdings and to unblock \$29 million for troubled enterprises. None of these steps gets at the root of the disease, the British-style "free trade" embraced alike by President François Mitterrand's socialist regime and its "conservative" rivals, now sharing power since Balladur became premier.

Since 1983, there have been eight plans to "save" the industry, for a total of \$5.8 billion. Yet, as the president of the Marseilles fishing commission said, "We don't want hand-outs. Compensatory payments like those to the farmers are the beginning of the end."

The 120,000-person fishing sector comprises captains and sailors, seamen and wholesalers, owner-operator fishermen and industrial fishing, each with a different social regime. The 23,000 seamen are generally paid on the basis of splitting the proceeds of the sale. For example: the catch brings \$13,800 at auction. But, once deductions are made—

\$5,170 for diesel fuel, \$1,700 for port taxes, living expenses for 15 days at sea, ice, oil, and use of the equipment (levied by the boat owner)—the rest is divided by the number of sailors, say, 10. That's \$517 per sailor. Take out about a third for social security withholdings, that leaves for \$258-344 for two weeks' work at 17 hours a day—hardly a living wage in an advanced-sector country where living costs rival those of the United States. Even then, a small fish catch or a drop in the quoted price can diminish or wipe out this payment. Moreover, social assessments are based on lump-sum wages divided into five categories.

## The free-trade poison

One problem the French fishermen face is cutthroat competition among countries, which is the result of globalization of the market, for instance, under GATT. The submission of poor countries to International Monetary Fund shock therapy forces them to slash social costs and increase exports in order to service the debt. Korea has a fleet whose seamen are prisoners working off their sentences. In order to meet their quota, they have to operate completely illegally inside Guyana's territorial waters. Unless France works to break up the insane GATT "free trade" framework and impose a rational organization of world markets and fish catches that assures a fair price, its fishing industry will soon die.

Secondly, the industry inside France suffers from local "free trade" chaos, and begs for re-regulation. Every elected official in Brittany wants his port to have its own little dockside auction, with the result that the wholesale purchasers are atomized. Hence, when a fisherman makes a large catch, he cannot sell it, because the dockside wholesaler is unable to buy it all. Every increase in the catch brings a drop in the price, with the fish being undersold; and this happens not only to that fisherman and his crew, but also to everyone else who brings the same species into port. The wholesalers, who "corner" the fishermen, are "cornered" in turn by the national distributors. Whereas the distributor can choose his supplier from any country in Europe, the wholesaler, with no financial resources, is stuck in his home port.

Finally, the "auction," the method of selling to the highest bidder, doesn't allow the price to be set in advance—but that's the iron law of the system of medium- and large-scale distribution, which accounts for 50% of consumption and 60% of the wholesalers' sales. Reducing the number of auctions and putting them on a rational footing would let the fisherman with a large catch look for a purchaser who is not systematically "breaking" his prices.

And, complain the fishermen, "There aren't any more fish." True: The seas are becoming depleted from overexploitation. That is one reason the fleet is too large and so deeply in debt. Yet if the free-trade straitjacket were thrown off, the solution even to this problem is at hand: France is in the vanguard of fish-breeding technologies, which is so vital to restocking the oceans and genetically improving species.