

The Fogo Island Fishing Co-operative and its Workers: Lessons from the Fishery

Fogo Island Fisheries Co-operative in Middle Age – workplace, union and community

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Summer students:

Chris Hattie 2007 - newly graduated B.Commerce (Economics) at Saint Mary's University)

Lauren Simeson 2008 - second year Master's student in International Development Studies, Saint Mary's University)

Introduction

- The Fogo Island Fishing Co-operative's success is directly related to its relations with its members, the employees, the union and the wider community. In its 40 year history, in addition to the ups and downs of the cod, groundfish and crab fishery itself, the co-op has faced unionization, strike threats and one major complaint at the NL Human Rights Commission. This research examines the modern day labour and community relations situation in the co-op and tries to explain the on-again, off-again problems which beset co-ops and their unions.

Background and Rationale

- While co-ops typically begin on an optimistic note, with collective enthusiasm and drive, what happens to co-ops when they reach middle age?
- What happens to co-ops in the fishery which is subject to commodity scarcity, low prices and marketing ups and downs?
- Research questions included:
 - How does history influence the origins of the Fogo co-op?
 - What was the Fogo Process?
 - How does governance work in the Fogo co-op?
 - What are the labour relations like in the co-op?
 - How do co-ops survive the bad times and build for the good times?

Project Methodology

- Researchers travelled to Fogo Island in 2006 to conduct interviews and research. They used open-ended interviews with managers and workers at the Co-op, and the wider community. In addition historical, file, and video data were gathered.

Community and University Collaboration

- In 1967, the Co-op was born out of the Fogo Process. The Fogo Process was spear-headed by the Department of Extension at Memorial University (St. John's), filmmakers at the National Film Board of Canada, along with Fogo Island community members. Unlike other fishing communities, Fogo islanders had refused to be resettled elsewhere by the Smallwood government. Yet there were problems with the community and the fishery in this remote place. The Fogo Process encouraged the islanders to talk to one another and begin working in concert rather than as disparate smaller communities. The dialogue was filmed, and community members got to know each other through the filmed interviews. Discovering how much they had in common, the co-op was born.
- Our community member no longer works for the Co-op as there have been layoffs due to economic and social hardship there
- However as a result of interaction with the university researchers, she became a student in our online Master's program in the Management of Co-ops and Credit Unions ... we hope to work more with her in the future.

Partnership

- Given the governance structure of the Fogo co-op there was not a ready way to “partner” with the organization.
- One employee did become more involved, on a personal level.
- Researchers also talked with the union representative, plus others in the community

Main Findings to Date:

- Founding of the Fogo Co-op part of a pattern of community solutions in the NF fishery
- Fogo was born out of a crisis in the fishery and the attempt to force relocation
- Decline of cod stocks, cod moratorium, poor harvests and failing markets mean a community under stress
- Problems in capitalizing the industry and keeping plant workers in work
- Problems of lack of voice of fish workers and some fishers in the co-op
- Fishers and fish workers needed a union to represent them
- Divisions among fishing villages on Fogo, which meant fault lines in the co-op emerged
- The Human Rights Commission found fault with the co-op over a major complaint -- further tore into the fabric of the co-op

Planned deliverables:

- Already several papers have been given on project including—
- March 2008: “Do Co-operatives Protect Workers Rights: Lessons from Canada” -- Paper sent to Marco Biagi Foundation for post-conference publication; paper given at Biagi Conference, Modena, Italy.
- June 2007: “Lessons from Fogo Island Co-operative – Unions and the Co-operative” – at the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (CIRA), Montreal, Quebec.
- May 2007: “Fogo Island Co-operative and its community” at Canadian Association for Studies of Co-operatives, Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences, Saskatoon, Sask.
- June 2006: with Larry Haiven: “The Fogo Island Cooperative Society and its Workers: Lessons from the Fishery,” at the Master of Management – Cooperatives and Credit Unions (MMCCU) annual symposium, The Co-operative and its Workers, Halifax, NS.

Implications for the Social Economy

- This project looks at one aspect of the Atlantic fishery and its community. As there are still many communities in all the provinces whose fish plants are threatened with closure and whose way of life is uncertain, the model of the Fogo Co-op could be very instructive and useful
- Issues such as:
 - How to manage in tough economic times
 - The role of trade unions in co-ops
 - Defending human rights as necessary rights in co-ops, and
 - The value of co-ops in single industry communitiesare valuable to investigate and know about.

As government tries to divest itself from providing employment, work creation and public services, co-ops and communities which depend on them could be a new model for development.

How students have benefitted...

- 2007-Summer SEEP Student, Chris Hattie
 - Student did research on history of the Fogo fishery, collected documents, got videos, catalogued materials, assessed the Newfoundland Fishing Industry Collective Bargaining Act.
- 2008-Summer SEEP Student, Lauren Simeson
 - Student transcribed interviews for the researchers, and learned about the fishery and its unions.
 - Both students improved their research skills, knowledge of industrial relations, understanding of the fishery and community in the Atlantic region

Conclusions, Next Steps...

- In summer 2008, one researcher travelled to the Labrador Fisherman's Union Shrimp Co. Ltd at L'Anse au Loup (Labrador) to conduct interviews. This fishery was once a co-op but no longer. Researchers will take the information and findings from Fogo and try to assess why fishers and fish plant workers decided against continuing with their co-op.
- This gives the researchers the opportunity to compare both one-industry communities in terms of work, governance, community issues, trade union and co-operatives.

- Thank you.