

BELGIUM: “Battle for Fish” International Seminar

In November, 1992, eight European NGOs met with the European Community (EC) to establish a framework for fisheries agreements between EC fishing companies and less developed countries, which would lead to broader perspectives for development. As a result of that meeting, the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Agreements (CFFA) was created.

On December 1, 1992, CFFA held an International Seminar, in Brussels (Belgium), called The Battle for Fish Conference. Sixty nine countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) participated, all interested in reviewing fishing treaties with Europe. Diplomats of diverse countries, Representatives to the European Parliament, specialist news reporters, representatives of European fishworkers and delegates from a large number of governmental organizations attended the Conference.

The objective of the Conference was to discover the best way to design equitable fishing treaties and to find the way to revise existing agreements.

The arguments put forward by the participants were: respect for marine ecosystems; the conservation of fish resources; sustenance of coastal populations; technological progress for those populations through the development of artisan and industrial fishing, etc. Emphasis was given to the need for financial compensation, adequate to the exploitation of national waters, with mention being made of the threat to European fishworkers and their jobs, arising from the supply of high quality fish by Third World fishworkers.

The delegation from Namibia raised its voice: “We are a country which has recently gained its independence at the cost of sufferings known to all. We wish to end the exploitation of our seas. We, today, and our children tomorrow, have a right to eat. We seek development for our country, specially in terms of fishing rights. What will be left, when everything has been stolen, even our hopes for the future?”

The National Collective of Fishworkers of Senegal (CNPS) also spoke: “Artisan fishworkers take 75% of the catch, 15% is taken by the local fishing industry, and only 10% goes to foreign ships. We call for recognition of artisan fishing and seek a portion of the benefits provided for in the ACP agreements, so that artisan fishing can develop as a profession and continue to organize”.

Are European fishworkers and their families really informed with respect to the continued deterioration of their profession, and with respect to the inequality in the precedents set between Europe and ACP countries? Do the people of Korea and Taiwan know that their well-being is often based on the exploitation of the Philippine people? Do Polish families imagine the harsh conditions to which Polish fishing crews are subjected, as they exploit the waters of Latin America? The diversity of perspectives reveals the complexity of the problem.

Among the Conference results was the agreement to review Common Fishing Policy (CFP), which will shape EC management of this issue during the coming 10 years. With considerable reductions in the CE fleet foreseen, significant impact in ACP coastal fisheries is expected. The process of renegotiation (together with the end of term in established treaties) creates an opportunity for improving and implementing more just fishing agreements, with a view to providing more equitable benefits for all parties. Of particular concern to many ACP nations is that their fish stocks will be harvested in a sustainable and productive way, ensuring the full mobilization of their potential to serve as an engine for much needed social and economic development.

The Report of the Conference, produced by CFFA, as well as the expositions and studies presented, are available from the Office of the ICSF Secretariat, in Brussels. ■