



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Background for Teachers: 1985-86 Fishermen's Strike

Who: Fishermen in the Seafarers International Union go on strike against boat owners in Seafood Producers Association from December 27, 1985 through mid-February 1986

Why: After the contract between the union and boat owners expired, the two groups could not settle on a contract. There were 3 key issues: (1) how to divide proceeds of catch, (2) fate of \$13 million pension fund for fishermen, and (3) how crewmen could be hired.

Result: The strike fizzles out, the Seafarers International Union is defunct, and fishermen sail without the option of union contracts after 1985.

Narrative:

The Seafarers International Union (SIU), representing about one-third of New Bedford-Fairhaven 250-boat fleet, went on strike on December 26, 1985 when negotiations with the Seafood Producers Association, representing boat owners, failed. There were three key issues that boat owners and fishermen disagreed on: (1) how to divide proceeds of catch, (2) fate of the \$13 million New Bedford Fishermen's Pension Trust and Health and Welfare Fund, and (3) how crewmen could be hired. Overall, the boat owners wanted a larger cut of the profits to cover rising prices for mortgages, repairs, and insurance while crewmembers wanted a higher cut to keep up with rising costs of living. Winter 1985 – 1986 was a lean season, with fish landings down 12 million pounds from the same period in 1984, so ultimately both boat owners and crewmembers were suffering from lower profits. While less than half of the 200+ boats sailed under union contracts, the strikes shut down the port and stopped the fish auction beginning in early January. Picket lines were set up on the docks and in front of the Wharfinger Building, which held the city-sponsored fish auction. Negotiations between the two sides and their representatives continued throughout January 1986, though slowly and oftentimes halting when one side walked out of the talks. At the end of the strike, there were no new contracts between the SIU and boat owners.

Violence and threats were reported throughout the main strike period of late December 1985 to mid-February 1986, including a bomb threat on the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge on January 10, 1986. Anonymous call came in shortly before 11am when the bridge opened for a scalloper leaving the harbor to go fish. The Police Chief requested a greater Coast Guard presence as precaution and the 82-foot cutter, *Point Bonita*, was sent from Woods Hole. Other violence included slashed car tires, rocks thrown at boats and boat owners' cars, and wires pulled from the electrical control box at the Wharfinger auction house. William Fuller, a boat owner and member of the Offshore Mariners Association, said that pickets slashed his car tires and threw

rocks at his boat on December 30, 1985 when he and his crew tried to take the boat out. They needed a police escort to get to the boat and Fuller said that, "I've been on those docks 29 years, I've never been scared. I was scared that day. Those guys were walking around with shovel handles, sticks."

On January 9, 1986, 14 days into the strike, the first 12 fishing boats left the port with non-union crews. Non-union boats received threats, but the Seafarers International Union representative, Joseph Piva said that the union had no dispute with them. Some non-union fishermen joined the picket lines, both in support of the union fishermen and for fear of not having a job when the strike ended. Paul Tetreault, a fisherman formerly on Knute Aarsheim's non-union scalloper, summed up both sides, saying "I just don't feel right about making money while these guys are walking the picket line. These guys are saying if you fish now, you're not going to be able to get on union boats later on."

Timeline

1930s- Many fisherman in New Bedford unionize and negotiate regular contracts with Associations of Boat Owners over pay, pension, health care and conditions.

- New Bedford Seafood Producers Association union founded to represent vessel owners
- Atlantic Fishermen's Union, the local branch of the Seafarers' International Union (SIU) of the American Federation of Labor union founded to represent fishermen

1960s and 1970s- Foreign owned "factory" ships, low fish prices caused by cheap foreign imports, and concerns about depleting fish stocks contributed to the establishment of the **Magnuson–Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act** of 1976. The MSFCM established the 200-mile limit and increased federal regulation of the ground fish and scallop fisheries.

1980- Fishermen and boat owners engage in a tie-up, in an effort to stop fishing, increase the demand for fish and raise fish prices.

1981- Seafood Workers in New Bedford go on strike. Skilled fish cutters got an increase, but most workers accepted pay cuts.

1983- New Bedford is the most valuable port in the United States, by value of catch. New Bedford fisherman landed 112.2 million pounds of fish valued at \$109.3 million.

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