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By Charles Scontras, Special to the Sun Journal

In the current effort of Maine lobster fishermen to maintain and enhance their interest, John Drouin, a Cutler lobsterman and vice chairman of the Maine Lobster Advisory Council -- a group of fishermen and dealers who work with the Department of Marine Resources to protect the industry -- noted that Maine lobstermen operate as independent business owners, compared with Canadian lobster fishermen, who are represented by unions and thus exert greater influence against the processors. "Until the day comes when we become unionized or one big co-op, we are just 5,000 individuals," Drouin said.

That was not always so. Rummaging through the attic of Maine labor history, one discovers that the Maine lobster fishermen made a major contribution to the American labor movement when they organized the Lobster Fishermen's International Protective Association, American Federation of Labor in 1907 (LFIPA, AFL), "the first of its kind in the history of the labor movement."

The birth of the union representing the "toilers of the sea" occurred against a background of a renaissance of the labor movement in Maine after two statewide labor organizations, the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, collapsed during the depression of the 1890s. Phoenix-like, the Maine State Federation of Labor was reborn in 1904, and by 1907 enthusiastic union disciples counted 225 local unions scattered cross 68 cities, towns and plantations.

Returns from 216 of the unions revealed that the membership had reached at least 16,804 wage-earners. Some speculated the numbers were as high as 25,000. Thomas Lyons, veteran granite cutter and union official from Vinalhaven, became the first commissioner of labor to be drawn from the ranks of organized labor. The birth of the modern labor movement in Maine had been launched.

It was true that no screeching steam whistle or factory bell awakened and called the lobstermen to work, and that no employer required them to comply with workplace rules and regulations. It was also generally true that the fruits of their labor (the lobster catch) was theirs to dispose of as they chose. Such control over their work lives, however, was always subject to the whims of nature and was increasingly challenged by changing economic circumstances at the turn of the century.

Under market conditions in which many buyers competed for their catch, lobster fishermen lacked an incentive for united action. Demand for lobsters was fairly constant and many fishermen were not obligated to sell their lobsters from day to day, as the lobsters could live for several hours out of water, or, when placed in cars in the water, kept for weeks or months.

But this idyllic competitive market condition would change, reflecting the economic transformation sweeping across the nation. By 1904 one or two large firms, generally brought together by merger, controlled at least half the output in 78 different industries. The advantageous market position of the lobster fishermen was altered by a growing concentration of buyers -- "the lobster trusts" -- who sought to control the price they paid for the crustaceon.

A union granite cutter from Vinalhaven described the new economic environment which confronted lobster fishermen when he observed that "These fishermen never realized the necessity of their

organizing, because the buyers were generally in competition, and the highest bidder got the catch. But the time came when there was a rumor of a combine to control the whole business: The buyers were all to agree only to buy a stipulated sum, and it began to look as if the fishermen were ‘up against it,’ the remedy was in their own hands. Organize! was the slogan...”

Along with the concentration of buyers, lobster fishermen were increasingly challenged by a declining lobster population. Early legislative efforts to regulate the catch and sale of the small lobsters proved ineffective, as lobster-catchers regarded such legislation, and the fish warden assigned to enforce it, as interference with the “natural rights of fishermen."

The lobster fishermen of Vinalhaven, where the granite industry had been unionized since 1877, and collective action had a vintage quality to it, took the initiative in protecting themselves and the “toothsome crustacea,” and organized the first union of lobster fishermen on Feb. 22, 1905. The movement quickly spread up and down the whole coast hoping to win over the estimated 18,000 lobster catchers. “This is one industry that cannot be successfully ‘trustified’ shouted a militant lobster fisherman. National organizers joined in the labor organizing crusade and what was a first in labor union history took a nautical turn as they hired a 36-foot sloop with AFL emblazoned on its sails to organize lobster fishermen and other workers. The movement reached into Nova Scotia.

Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor visited Vinalhaven in the summer of 1905 to help baptize the new movement. His personal endorsement of the young labor movement filled the air with the excitement and hope that characterizes new beginnings. On Jan. 22, 1907, a charter was issued to the lobster fishermen as an affiliated international union. By the fall of 1907, the new union reported 1,055 members and 22 locals.

The unions were applauded as an important force for conservation education and enforcement as they aided in stopping illegal traffiking in “shorts.” Their by-laws provided a penalty for any lobsterman who caught and sold lobsters of illegal size, and for putting an end to raiding of each others traps. The union also bargained successfully with local buyers and with “smacks,” usually steamers sent out by wholesale dealers fromPortland, Rockland and elsewhere, which were able to store between 3,000 and 10,000 lobsters in their wells. Before the union, many lobster fishermen could not afford to wait for higher bids. The prices offered were prices they had to accept, and the prices offered varied from place to place.

The lobster fishermen were required to show that they were in good union standing before they could sell to the lobster steamers The union was credited with standardizing prices, drawing up trade agreements with wholesale buyers, and persuading some of the steamers to fly the union flag and to handle nothing but union lobsters.

The initial success of the union was due, in part, to the fact that many of the fishermen, were, or had been, granite cutters. These economic hybrids had a rich source of experience to draw upon as the granite cutters were longtime veterans of labor organization and industrial conflict and had organized the Granite Cutters International Union of the United States and British Provinces of America in Rockland in 1877. In the immediate background, too was the birth of Maine Socialist Party in

Rockland in 1900 with its message that capitalism was beyond redemption which contributed to the climate of collective action. Also important to the initial support of the fishermen's labor movement was the interest and support it received from the national headquarters of the AFL. Such support reinforced the fishermen's belief in the justice of their cause and encouraged their expectations of success.

The fishermen's labor movement was short-lived, however. Although scattered locals continued to exist in 1912, by 1908 the movement was a shadow of its former strength. While the factors for the decline of the movement are not entirely clear, contributing factors included the panic of 1907 which impacted Maine and the labor movement generally. The official census of labor unions in Maine for 1909 lists only four lobster fishermen's unions, none of them in the stronghold of Vinalhaven. The economic dislocation may have made the $1 initiation fee and monthly dues of 30 cents burdensome for fishermen who were not regarded as a "wealthy class." Further, the Maine State Branch of the American Federation of Labor, may have hastened the decline by failing to establish formal links with the embryonic fishermen's organization. Facing its own growing ideological opposition and weakened financial problems during the Depression, the Maine labor organization was in no condition to help sustain the young fishermen's union.

Leaders among the lobster fishermen's unions also noted an early "falling off" of membership and traced it to the degree of coercion that ought ot be employed to insure conformity in the movement. Indeed, one of the reason union leaders advocated "centralization" was that it would contribute to sustaining the initial enthusiasm that sparked the movement and insure that adequate resources were available to visit, assist and encourage the weaker unions, as well as expand the movement.

Despite the valuable lessons that union granite workers brought to the "toilers of the sea," collective action was a new experience for most fishermen. As the president of the LFIPA, AFL noted, "the men employed in the Lobster Fishing Industry are a class who never had any experience in unionism and therefore are by far too impatient for me or anyone else to cope successfully with their ideas."

Again, while reluctant to attribute the decline to "any one individual or to any one condition" he singled out the "rather radical and implusive (sic) method used by members everywhere." He may have been referring to the demand that all smacks fly the union flag and wholesalers purchase lobsters only from union members, the lobster fishermen's version of the closed shop.

And then public perception entered into the mix of factors explaining decline: "What is the matter with those fishermen? Haven't they got a monopoly of their business? Don't they get a big price for their lobsters? What need have they for organizing?" Many no doubt perceived the fishermen as more akin to the employer, small farmer, or preindusrial artisan than the wage earner. They owned the means of production, a home, and often a farm, and but for the gyrations of weather patterns, could control the cadence of their labor. Such perceptions did little to generate support in sustain the labor movement among the lobster catchers.

Finally, ideological efforts emanating from the office of the Commissioner of Sea and Shore Fisheries, were made to disengage the new union of lobster fishermen from its parent organization, the American

Federation of Labor.

History reveals that the romantic image of the lobster fishermen as an independent, sturdy, self-reliant species of worker may be somewhat limiting. Other chapters in the dusty archives of history confirm that when they perceive that they have failed to receive the full “fruits of their labor,” they could become militant, engage in collective action, and shatter stereotypical images of their life and work.

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