

# Souris blockade will continue

By Brandon MacKenzie

Over the past two weeks, Prince Edward Island media has been saturated with the plight of our Island fishermen in protest against the New Brunswick herring seiner fleet. Our inshore fishermen say the fishing methods used by the seiners are destroying the local herring stocks and are threatening the entire aquatic food chain which our Island economy so heavily depends upon. Island fishermen want the New Brunswick seiners pushed further offshore, out of their inshore fishing grounds.

In their efforts to stop the massive seiners from getting their catch to market, fishermen from PEI, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Magdalen Islands have placed themselves between the trucks meant to haul the catch to producers in New Brunswick and the fleet tied up at the Souris harbour. Their protest led legal counsel representing the operating interests of the seiner fleet to pursue a court injunction allowing them to unload their catches. The seiners have a legal right to fish our inshore waters according to a federal ruling, and now a court order has confirmed their right to dock at the Souris wharf. To enforce this court injunction, the RCMP assembled their tactical response team and bused the riot police to PEI to ensure that trucks could roll past the protesters without delay.

The presence of the RCMP riot police in full body armour armed with

rubber bullets, attack dogs, tear gas, and assault rifles has caused a dramatic increase in tension. The fishermen have continually led a non-violent protest, never causing harm to person or property; however the arrival of riot police signified a severe escalation of the conflict. On Tuesday about 100 riot police marched on protesting fishermen to allow five trucks loaded with herring to leave the Souris wharf. Many people on PEI awoke to the shock of what had happened early that morning.

On Thursday, November 6th the situation got far worse. Once again the seiners docked at the Souris wharf to unload their catch. Sixteen trucks arrived to transport the fish to New Brunswick, but once again were blocked from exiting the wharf by protesting fishermen. To enforce the court injunction, the RCMP riot squad lined up, threatened arrests, and marched on the protesters. In solidarity, nearly 50 fishermen sat down on the pavement, put their hands in their pockets, and faced the oncoming tactical officers in full battle dress. To disperse the crowd, the police began arrests, sending 14 to jail in nearby Montague. During the actions of the riot squad, two 60 year old fishermen were injured to the point of requiring medical attention at a nearby hospital before heading to jail. Images of a lifelong Island fisherman, his face bruised on one side, road rash on the other with stitches above his left eye flooded our television screens that night.

Learning of the early morning incidents at the wharf, a couple of us headed up to Souris in support. In the process we learned of a second standoff still underway in Rollo Bay at the elementary school. During the evening, RCMP had directed 6 trucks to the school's parking lot to wait for their opportunity to load. Passing fishermen wasted no time in recognizing that the court injunction did not apply to the school grounds and surrounded the trucks with their vehicles preventing them from heading to the wharf.

As we arrived in Rollo Bay, the situation was very clear. The fishermen were sending a message to Ottawa, "get the big boats the hell out of our waters". About 200 fishermen and supporters were adamant that the remaining vessel waiting to unload would never see the trucks needed to transport the fish to New Brunswick. Members of PEI's emergency response team complimented by additional RCMP officers observed the crowd and helped with traffic control at the scene. News trucks arrived and turned on the cameras. Many awaited the arrival of the dreaded RCMP tactical response team. Rumours circulated through the crowd of more trucks on the way, of plans to burn the tractor trailers already blocked by the fishermen, of demands to release their friends from jail without charges. The anger and frustration was evident through the emotions expressed on the faces of those present.

At 10 minutes to noon, a fisher-

man who had met with the police at the scene stood up on the back of a pickup to address the crowd. He explained the decision that the protesters would have to make. "At twelve o'clock these cowboys are going to sign off", he said referring to the PEI emergency response officers, "and then those other cowboys are going to march in" referring to the riot police in battle dress which had been gathering at a nearby Inn. He explained that if the protesters allowed the trucks to leave, the police would escort the remaining six trucks off the Island with empty trailers - spoiling the catch in the hold of one of the vessels. Their other choice was to stay and face the riot police who had clashed with them earlier in the day at the wharf. At the deadline, the protesters took the small victory and sent the trucks home. Many in the crowd showed signs of disappointment with the decision, but the threat of more conflict with the riot police proved to be too much.

The trucks will come again, just as soon as the seiner fleet can fill their holds and when they do, the fishermen and supporters from all over PEI will be back. What drives a 60 year old man to face a line of marching riot police with batons, shields, and body armour? Clearly, as observers from a distance we do not understand the magnitude of the situation. For a man to face certain arrest he must feel as though he has no other options - his back is against the wall.



Fishermen blockade six of the herring trucks at Rollo Bay School



A handfull of the PEI Emergency Response officers