

Disabled cruise liner arrives in Alabama after days at sea

Matthew MacEgan
16 February 2013

Some 3,100 passengers and 1,000 crew members on board the Carnival cruise ship *Triumph* arrived in Mobile, Alabama Thursday night after spending five horrific days at sea on the disabled vessel.

On Sunday, an engine room fire disabled the *Triumph* about 150 miles off the Yucatan Peninsula, stranding the passengers and crew in the Gulf of Mexico.

Text messages and tweets from *Triumph* passengers over the next few days reported deplorable conditions, including the necessity of defecating into plastic bags due to a shortage of restrooms. Passengers slept on the open deck in the pouring rain in some cases due to the stench that resulted from the loss of refrigeration capabilities and sewage-soaked carpets.

Five days and one broken towline later, the two remaining tugboats finally brought the ship with its hungry and unwashed passengers to a dock in Mobile. Photos taken from the air reveal the tent city passengers made out of sheets built on the top deck.

Carnival confirmed there were less than two dozen public toilets working for the nearly 4,200 people on board, and reports indicated that passengers were reduced to eating candy and ketchup on buns for sustenance.

A physician from Texas aboard the stranded vessel compared the situation to “being locked in a Porta Potty [portable toilet] for days” and stated that it was worse than the two recent hurricanes his family had to endure. A young woman told the media, “We are all beyond disgusting,” and explained she had curled up on the casino floor one night when the top deck was pelted with rain.

One passenger described her experience on CNN’s website, noting this about “the worst part of the trip”: “Anywhere you went on the ship, the rancid stench from sewage was evident. At this point, in order to breathe, our only option was to keep moving to an open space where we could take a deep breath of fresh air.

“Passengers were becoming anxious, aggravated, irritable and angry. Lines for food and beverages were getting longer and longer. This made people even more panicked and many began to hoard food on their plates, with nearly half of it not being consumed.”

While the passengers have now debarked in Alabama, the effects of the incident are only beginning to be felt by Carnival. The company has cancelled 14 scheduled trips this year aboard the *Triumph* due to the estimated time needed for repairs, a disruption that will reportedly drive down the company’s earnings by eight to ten cents a share during the first half of the fiscal year.

More costly than the repairs and disruptions to service may be the impact of media coverage on popular perception. Peter G. Whelpton, a cruise industry consultant said, “I think they will see a short term drop in their bookings.” This was also an effect of the sinking of the *Costa Concordia* last January, owned by a subsidiary of Carnival, which resulted in the deaths of 32 passengers. However, this drop in bookings was countered by rate-cutting and promotions offered last summer.

The *Triumph*, which had mechanical troubles last month that delayed a similar cruise, is only the latest in a series of cruise ships to experience problems in the last several years, including the *Costa Concordia*.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports there were 16 outbreaks of norovirus on cruise ships. In 2007, the *Explorer* sank off the coast of South America necessitating the rescue of 150 passengers and crew after the ship hit an iceberg. The construction of ships with numerous decks also poses risks, as the *Louis Majesty* demonstrated in 2010. Two passengers were killed and 16 were injured when the ship was destroyed by high waves near the *Costa Brava*.

Cruise ships are gigantic floating hotel/casinos (the *Triumph* has 14 decks), carrying thousands of passengers. Passenger costs are kept relatively low through economies

of scale and the exploitation of low-wage labor, often Asian workers. Crew members work 12-hour shifts (or longer) for weeks and even months without days off. The cruise lines are notoriously allergic to paying overtime and often do not comply with minimal labor and safety requirements.

Carnival is incorporated in Panama, where it escapes US labor laws. Carnival's CEO Micky Arison, who also owns the NBA's Miami Heat, is currently on the Forbes list of the 400 richest Americans at number 68 with a net worth of \$5 billion and took in \$7.6 million in total compensation in 2011.

Despite setbacks, the cruise industry continues to boom. Bookings on Cruise Lines International Association member vessels rose from 16.3 million in 2011 to 17.2 million in 2012. The annual passenger growth rate of these vessels has been 7.2 percent since 1980. Carnival reported revenues of \$15.8 billion and a net income of \$1.9 billion in 2011.

However, Carnival is being less than generous in the compensation it is promising Triumph passengers. According to a press release, the company is offering \$500 to each passenger in addition to a full refund and a future cruise credit. Some passengers have indicated their intention to refuse the miserable offer, viewing this as "hush money," similar to the €11,000 offered to uninjured passengers on the Costa Concordia last year.

However, legal experts suggest that passengers will have difficulty recovering damages unless they are able to show evidence of physical injury. Maritime law bars passengers from recovering damages due to emotional distress, unless they can prove it was the result of an operator's negligence.

Matthew Jacob, an analyst with ITG Investment Research expressed confidence that the Triumph incident would not slow the popularity of cruising. "We don't see any spikes downward," Jacob said, referring to the lack of public backlash following recent televised reports of mechanical problems and viruses affecting cruise ships. Consultant Peter Whelpton commented cynically, "The public's memory is short."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact