

Cruise ship industry announces worldwide shutdown in response to coronavirus pandemic, leaving ship workers in the lurch

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On Friday, March 13, US President Donald Trump announced on Twitter that four major cruise corporations would suspend their customer operations for 30 days in light of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL), MSC, Carnival Cruise Line (CCL), and Royal Caribbean Cruise Line (RCCL) all followed the announcement with notices on social media that they would be shutting down a vast majority of their voyages until mid-April and later.

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings announced that it would suspend operations for its three subsidiary brands, NCL, Regent Seven Seas, and Oceana Cruises, while RCCL and CCL announced that they would suspend all North American voyages. Celebrity Cruises, Holland America Line, Costa, Disney Cruises, Cunard and Seaborne are among several other major luxury cruise lines that have taken similar such measures, with more likely to follow suit.

Also on Friday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that all Canadian ports will be closed to vessels carrying more than 500 passengers, effectively barring all ships on major cruise lines from entering the country, as part of that country's effort to slow the transmission of the novel coronavirus.

Monumental economic losses are expected from even the temporary suspension of cruise line operations. According to the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, a cruise industry research publication, cruise ships contributed an estimated "\$126 billion in total economic impact and 1 million jobs paying \$41 billion in wages and salaries" in 2016.

In addition to the billions in profits that will be lost, hundreds of thousands of ship workers' lives will be dramatically impacted. Crew-center.com, a cruise ship employee news organization, estimates that the total number of people employed globally in the industry as of 2017 was 250,000, including crew currently working on board as well as staff outside of regular rotation. This does not include workers in several other dependent tourism industries in port

cities around the world, which will also inevitably be affected by the shutdown.

Cruise ships employ staff from all over the globe, with each ship easily representing 30 to 40 different countries in its crew demographic, including many workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Mauritius, Russia, Ukraine, several European and Caribbean countries, the US, Australia and Great Britain.

All of the recent shutdown measures were taken following a major announcement on Thursday by Princess Cruise Lines (PCL) that it would cancel the entirety of its voyages for 60 days, until May 10, in an effort to deal with the impact of the virus. Princess Cruise Lines took these measures in light of recent events on the Diamond Princess, a PCL ship with a 2,760-passenger and 1,100-crew capacity, in which 696 people were infected and seven died in an onboard outbreak of the coronavirus. The outbreak lasted approximately 25 days spanning late-January to February.

Immediately following the disaster on the Diamond Princess, as well as other coronavirus infection scares on the World Dream and Holland America Line's Westerdam, cruise lines across the board began rerouting ship itineraries away from Asia, and as the virus spread geographically, Italy and other affected areas. Additionally, cruise lines almost universally banned passengers and crew from embarking who had recently traveled through areas in which outbreaks of the virus were prominent.

Events on the Diamond Princess exposed the rapidity with which COVID-19 has the potential to spread within the contained environment of a cruise ship, and therefore the utter vulnerability of the entire industry to global disease outbreak. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as well as Anthony Fauci of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and a top member of US Vice President Mike Pence's Coronavirus task force, have stated that the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus on the Diamond Princess

were a failure.

Kentaro Iwata, a disease expert from Kobe University, who was admitted to the ship during the quarantine for research purposes, offered severe criticisms of both the PCL's and the Japanese Health Ministry's measures to stop the virus' spread. Norio Ohmagari of Japan's Disease Control Prevention Center also admitted flaws in the quarantine process.

It is still unclear whether or not the environment on board cruise ships poses an immediate health danger in light of the pandemic. On March 6, Pence announced that 21 individuals on board PCL's Grand Princess tested positive for coronavirus while the ship was in quarantine in the port of San Francisco, California. On March 8, Fauci warned in an interview on NBC's Meet The Press, "If you're a person with an underlying condition—and you are particularly an elderly person with an underlying condition—you need to think twice about getting on a plane or on a long trip ... And not only think twice, just don't get on a cruise ship"

On the following Monday, in a White House coronavirus task force briefing in which Trump announced that the White House was "working with [the cruise ship industry] very strongly ... so that they don't get penalized for something that's not their fault," Fauci somewhat revised his statement. "I think if you're a healthy young person, that there is no reason, if you want to go on a cruise ship, to go on a cruise ship," he said.

Cruise lines across the industry have offered passengers whose travel plans have been interrupted by the shutdown reconciliation packages including future travel vouchers, flexible cancellation policies and even additional credit for future ship spending. No such consistent industry-wide measures have been taken, however, to financially or medically protect ship crew.

Action in regard to ship staff has ranged from releasing employees with a fraction of pay for workdays lost, to instructing all crew to remain at their positions as usual or allowing voluntary leave with no pay. While directives for employees have been changing rapidly, it's evident that the cruise ship giants will attempt to impose their losses on the backs of their workforce.

While PCL issued internal departmental memos stating that it would award some crew members a maximum of 30 days' pay in light of cancelled contracts, this amount is likely only a fraction of what many crew members stand to lose, as ship employment contracts typically range between four and 10 months. It is common in the industry that contracts stipulate no obligation for companies to compensate workers for lost wages in the event of disasters forcing them to suspend operations.

There is also no guarantee that the directives for ship staff

will protect them from the spread of the virus. During the outbreak crisis on board the Diamond Princess, it was reported by crew that the company forced employees to work under unsafe conditions.

One crew member from the Diamond Princess told the *Guardian*, "We were abused. Can you imagine? The situation was alarming but they kept us working." The employee explained that crew should not have continued to serve guests, and that the ship should have been evacuated far earlier than it was. Another interviewed crew member said that measures to contain the spread of the virus were only applied to the paying customers and not to the staff, and that crew were singled out for speaking out against the conditions. Another employee reported effects of psychological trauma after the experience on the Diamond Princess.

The handling of the disaster on the Diamond Princess as well the subsequent shutdown by the entire industry demonstrate that there exists no solution within the framework of the capitalist system—in which every consideration is subordinated to the profits interests of a tiny elite—to protect ship workers from the outbreak, as well as from the financial fallout that will inevitably ensue from the corporate response to the pandemic.

As the WSWs wrote in its perspective on March 10, "Modern society presents all problems as global problems affecting the masses. The great historical challenges facing society cannot be solved within the framework of a social order based on nation-states and the principle of private accumulation of wealth."

Ship workers must fight to advance their own interests in response to the crisis of the industry sparked by the coronavirus pandemic. No confidence should be placed in the cruise corporations' measures to keep workers financially and medically protected.

Workers must form independent committees of action to demand that they are guaranteed full compensation for all lost wages, and that they are guaranteed their safety to the fullest extent scientifically and medically possible. In issuing these demands, it is imperative that workers must recognize their initiatives as part of a greater struggle for the transformation of society on the basis of a global, socialist economy.



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