

Cruise ship workers expose deadly conditions, financial ruin in light of coronavirus pandemic

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While cruise ship companies around the world have disembarked passengers on mass in response to the coronavirus pandemic, there currently remain approximately 93,000 marooned crew on 114 ships in US waters as of Saturday, according to a US Coast Guard press release. An additional 183 ships housing approximately 107,000 more crew members worldwide also face a similar situation, according to the *Maritime Executive*, a cruise industry business magazine.

On March 29, the US Coast Guard issued a Marine Safety Information Bulletin (MSIB) declaring that all ships containing more than 50 persons within the Seventh District Area of Responsibility, which includes the entire coasts of Florida, Puerto Rico, Georgia and South Carolina, should take increased measures to treat ill individuals on board for “an indefinite period of time.” Only for those needing emergency medical attention would ships be allowed to request evacuation assistance. Since the release of the MSIB, tens of thousands of cruise ship crew members on hundreds of ships across the globe have been left stranded, with rapidly increasing reports of COVID-19 outbreaks, and related deaths.

Governments around the world have also responded to the plight of stranded cruise ship workers with a callous indifference. Last month, the Australian government shut its ports to incoming cruise ships containing thousands of crew after the March 19 disembarkation in Sydney of approximately 2,700 passengers from the Ruby Princess, many of whom later tested positive for COVID-19. At the time of the ban, 37 ships became stranded outside of Australian ports, with nearly a dozen remaining in limbo for weeks.

Holland America President Orlando Ashford has described the situation facing stranded ships as a “humanitarian crisis.” The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 20 total cruise ships within the US waters alone have been affected by COVID-19. There are doubtlessly many more such infected ships in international waters.

The US has further obstructed safe passage home for the stranded ship workers by banning from commercial transportation all individuals traveling from cruise ships, in a joint action issued on Saturday with Customs and Border Protection, the Coast Guard, and the CDC. A CDC memo placed the responsibility of crew transportation entirely on the cruise companies, directing them to provide private or chartered transportation to all of their repatriating crew.

The potential for deadly infection to spread rapidly in the environment of cruise ships is well-known, perhaps most of all from the case of the Diamond Princess in February, in which approximately 700 passengers and crew became infected, and 11 died from COVID-19.

Among those reported dead on cruise ships infected with COVID-19 include Andrew Fernandes, 48, a security officer from India on the Costa Favolosa, Wiwit Widarto, 50, an Indonesian crew member on the Holland America Zaandam, Orlando Hernandez, a Filipino kitchen steward on the Costa Luminosa, Robert Rodriguez Velasco, a Salvadoran galley worker on an MSC Cruises ship, an unnamed Filipino electrical worker on the Grand Princess, a Honduran worker on the MSC Opera, an Indonesian crew member on the Marella Dream, a Filipino worker on the Marella Explorer, and a Greek officer on the Marella Explorer 2, according to Crew-Center.com. Another worker on

the Celebrity Infinity was confirmed dead last week, although the company did not specify whether the death was COVID-19 related.

One ship worker reported to the *Miami Herald* that onboard management withheld information from the ship staff. “They kept saying no one had symptoms, everyone is fine, you’re in the best place you can be ... We knew that wasn’t true because we saw all the carts.” Another employee stated in the same article, “the feeling of being on board in a global crisis and being trapped is really hard.” Another reported, “I’m worried we’ve been lied to this whole time by management. It is reckless behavior on their part, in my opinion, and endangering.”

In addition to facing deadly conditions on board, thousands of crew members also face financial ruin from the response of the cruise companies to the pandemic. There have been reports of “non-essential” crew preemptively being terminated from their contracts while being kept on board as “non-working staff” with only a meager, 30-days salary as compensation. Some crew members have reported compensation packages of even lesser amounts, effectively rendering them hostages forced to work without compensation until the company successfully arranges for their repatriation. A Norwegian Cruise Lines human resources memo to employees, which was leaked to the *Miami Herald*, stated that “crew members who have already reached their ‘end of contract date’ will no longer be paid during their extended period on board.”

A worker on a Royal Caribbean ship told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “things are really awful right now. As of yet, I’ve not been paid for the last week on board, and I’m not sure when or if I’ll ever see this 30-days pay package. We’re going to sail to Singapore, as it’s anticipated that it might be one of the first places to open up for international travel. But because of the restrictions of the Australian government, we now have to sail all the way around the western side of the continent before anyone stands a chance of going home.”

Another worker on a Celebrity ship, who had tested positive for COVID-19, reported that although the conditions on board were comfortable and that he was thankful to remain on regular payroll, quarantine measures were insufficient and there was little to no

information being shared from management on the plan for repatriating crew.

“I’m starting to just accept that I guess I’m just a permanent resident of the ship,” another worker sarcastically wrote on a social media thread.

Workers in cruise ship entertainment departments, who are typically required to spend several weeks prior to embarkation rehearsing at company-owned facilities in major cities around the world, reported losing money on travel-related expenses associated with contracts which were terminated, and that had no compensation packages had yet been offered. Instead, reports of vague promises of future work opportunities for “when things return to normal,” were widespread.

Among other crew members who have either had work cancelled prior to joining a ship, as well as crew who have successfully been repatriated from terminated contracts on board, many have expressed anxiety at the prospect of not being unable to collect unemployment benefits back home. An American worker for Carnival shared on social media that he was told by the company’s human resources department that since the company does not deduct Federal Insurance Contribution Act (FICA) payments, he would be ineligible for unemployment benefits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for ship workers to advance their own interests in response to the crisis of the cruise industry. They must form independent committees of action to demand and implement measures protecting their health, safety and livelihoods, as part of the greater political struggle for the international transformation of society on the basis of a global, socialist economy. As events of this past week have demonstrated, no confidence should be placed at the hands of the cruise corporations, or capitalist governments worldwide.



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