

# Authorities seeking to force coronavirus-stricken ship out of Australian waters

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Even as more workers aboard the Ruby Princess cruise liner test positive for COVID-19 each day, authorities have ordered the ship to leave Australian waters within days.

New South Wales (NSW) Police Commissioner Mick Fuller told reporters at a press conference on Wednesday that the ship would depart on Sunday. While Fuller later said the date was “aspirational,” he added that “the Ruby can’t stay forever.”

The ship is currently moored at Port Kembla near Wollongong, having been forced to leave the Sydney region on April 5. So far, 162 of the 1,056 crew members on board have contracted COVID-19, and testing is not yet complete.

As recently as Thursday, four weeks after the ship arrived in Sydney, fewer than 300 of the ship’s crew had been tested. Testing of the entire crew was only started on Thursday, as part of preparations to force the ship out of Australian waters.

Although the workers have been self-isolated in their cabins since March 19, the illness has continued to spread. Thirteen crew members have been evacuated to receive medical treatment on land.

Reports indicate that the Ruby Princess will first travel to the Philippines, but it is unclear whether the crew will be allowed to leave the vessel when it arrives.

At least 50 nationalities are represented in the current crew. With tight restrictions on international travel in place throughout the world, returning home may be impossible.

Many of the crew, having expected to be at sea for several more months, likely do not have homes to return to.

Further complicating matters are reports that the ship’s captain is in isolation after being exposed to an infected crew member. Fuller told reporters: “If he was

[infected], then we’d have to fly a new captain over ... if they need to fly in additional crew members then we would facilitate that sensibly.”

Asked why the ship’s current crew could not be flown home, Fuller insisted: “We have offered that to Carnival ... if people want to get to the airport [and] they’re clearly not corona-symptomatic then we will facilitate that before [the ship] goes.”

Comments from crew members online and in the media indicate that at least some are in fact eager for such an opportunity.

Kate Henegan, an Irish musician on the ship, posted on Facebook: “We have been confined and self-isolated to our rooms for 23 days now. We would all like to get tested, and if healthy, get the chance to go home.”

Byron Sodani, a fitness instructor from Italy, told the *Illawarra Mercury*: “I have been okay on the boat for about 30 days but by the time it goes back to the US I might lose it on here.”

State and federal governments insist that Australia’s infection rate is low, and decreasing, as a result of social distancing measures. While the low number of tests conducted each day limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the official figures, only a relatively small number of COVID-19 patients are currently in hospital.

The Australian health system, criminally underfunded though it is, certainly has the capacity to provide a high level of medical care to any of the Ruby Princess crew who require it.

The crew should be allowed to leave the ship immediately, quarantined in vacant hotels, provided any medical care necessary and flown home when their safe passage can be guaranteed.

Instead, they are being treated as reckless criminals. An anonymous crew member told the *Sunday*

*Telegraph*: “Am I trapped? Yes, beyond recognition ... we are criminals under investigation and prisoners to the NSW authorities.

“Me and many other people have been refused [testing] and told it’s not necessary from day one.”

Channel 7 last night broadcast footage of restaurant workers on the ship entertaining passengers on March 18, the last night of the cruise. Implying that the crew was responsible for the virus outbreak, the report characterised their actions—a normal part of what they are contractually obliged to do—as “partying with passengers,” and declared that “homicide detectives are in possession of the vision.”

Despite such blatant efforts to malign the innocent Ruby Princess workers, the working class has shown great solidarity with the trapped crew.

On Tuesday afternoon the crew received 1,200 boxes containing snacks, tampons, razors, soap and other personal care items, along with notes of support from Port Kembla workers and their families. In response to the “great compassion, love and support” shown by the local community since the ship’s arrival, members of the Ruby Princess crew set up a crowdfunding page to raise money for a Wollongong charity that provides emergency housing.

While the crew languishes on board the ship, Carnival has terminated their contracts and those of their 90,000 or so colleagues around the world. According to *Business Insider*, a letter was sent to crew members on April 9 stating that all contracts would end on or before May 10. Workers would not be paid beyond June 9, whatever the original terms of their contract.

Crew members whose role was not deemed “essential” for the upkeep of their ship, but who are forced to remain on board in self-isolation would not be paid, but merely receive “food, lodging, and medical care.” In other words, the company plans to treat its employees as stateless prisoners.

Carnival is determined to quickly return the ship to the US, whatever the consequences for its crew. Jan Swartz, the company’s Australian group president said in a video posted to Facebook on Tuesday: “We remain optimistic that Emerald and Ruby Princess will still be able to offer roundtrip cruises from Seattle to Alaska in the late Summer.”

On March 19, Carnival offered up their fleet to

governments around the world for use as temporary offshore hospitals. In an effort to conceal the cynical character of this move, the company said it would charge for “only the essential costs of the ship’s operations while in port.”

The same day, the Ruby Princess docked in Sydney and Australian authorities allowed it to offload 2,700 passengers—some already exhibiting respiratory symptoms—without testing, screening, or quarantine.

In Australia alone, more than 650 COVID-19 cases and 19 deaths, have been linked to Ruby Princess passengers. An outbreak in northwest Tasmania, which resulted in the closure of two hospitals, and seven deaths so far, started with the return of three of the passengers.

The irresponsible actions of Carnival and the Australian authorities began earlier, however. The ship should never have been allowed to take on passengers and leave Sydney on its final voyage on March 8.

At that time, eight people had already died after contracting COVID-19 on another Carnival ship, the Diamond Princess, on which the virus had spread at a rate seven times higher than on land.

While the danger was clear, Carnival chose to pursue profit rather than protect the health and safety of its crew and passengers. The Australian government, determined to maintain “business as usual” for as long as possible amid signs the coronavirus was becoming a global pandemic, allowed the ship to sail and return.



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