Ruby Princess cruise ship forced out of Australian waters with coronavirus stricken staff on board

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30 April 2020

The coronavirus-stricken Ruby Princess was forced out to sea by Australian authorities last Thursday afternoon, despite what New South Wales (NSW) Police Commissioner Mick Fuller described as "not a zero risk" of serious illness developing on board.

Around half the crew were allowed to leave the ship earlier in the week and fly home. The remaining workers face another two weeks on board as the cruise liner makes its way from Port Kembla, south of Sydney, to Manila, where several of its sister ships are currently moored.

It is not clear where the ship or its crew will go after the Philippines, but the company has made clear it still intends to use the Ruby Princess for cruises between Seattle and Alaska as early as July.

Of the 567 workers who disembarked from the ship last week, 40 showing signs of the coronavirus were taken to local hotels for further quarantine under medical supervision. These workers will remain in isolation until they are deemed fit to fly.

According to Fuller, the crew still on board have all tested negative for COVID-19. Some crew members have claimed on Facebook, however, that they have not received their results from the most recent round of testing.

The fact that dozens of crew members were still too unwell or infectious to fly after five weeks of self-isolation strongly suggests that the coronavirus still presents a substantial threat to the workers on board. Whether these recent cases have been contracted from asymptomatic carriers or contaminated surfaces on board, there is no guarantee that more infections will not develop while the ship is at sea.

The Maritime Union of Australia and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) have claimed credit for the increased testing and partial repatriation of the crew. The fact that hundreds of workers are being sent out to sea at considerable risk of serious illness, and without any union action, underscores the fraudulent character of this posturing.

The unions have also exploited the crisis to promote nationalist demagogy. Speaking at Port Kembla as the ship prepared to depart, ITF Australian National Coordinator Dean Summers said: "The real core [of the problem] is the flag, is the registration of that ship, a filthy flag of convenience." In other words, the problem was that the Ruby Princess is not an Australian owned and registered vessel.

Summers called for a parliamentary inquiry aimed at ensuring that "the carriage of Australian passengers around our Australian coast is for Australian workers on Australian-flagged vessels."

The union assertions are aimed at promoting the fraudulent claim that Australian-registered ships are more likely to respect the rights of their workers than foreign-owned vessels. This is belied by the record of Australian-owned commercial shipping companies in slashing jobs and conditions, invariably with the assistance of the unions themselves.

Amid a global pandemic, the nationalist rhetoric of the unions is aimed at dividing workers and preventing a unified struggle by all mariners and cruise employees against the offensive of the global companies that dominate the sector. The union line, moreover, serves to cover for the responsibility of Australian state and federal authorities for the deadly Ruby Princess saga.

The ship's 1,100 crew had been self-isolated in their cabins since March 19, when 2,700 passengers were allowed to disembark in Sydney by the Australian Border Force (ABF) and NSW Health despite clear indications of a significant outbreak onboard.

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No health screenings were conducted, and the throng of incoming passengers were hustled in to Australia's busiest city before coronavirus swabs taken in the ship's medical centre could be tested on shore.

At least 900 confirmed cases and 21 deaths have been directly linked to the Ruby Princess, and numerous coronavirus clusters around the country have started with travellers returning home from the ship.

This includes a recent outbreak in northwest Tasmania that forced the closure of two hospitals, along with the mandatory self-isolation of 1,200 health workers and their families. The cluster has so far claimed eleven lives.

Public outrage over the mishandling of the Ruby Princess's return to Sydney has led NSW authorities to launch two separate investigations into the affair.

As has been the case with other COVID-19 outbreaks around Australia, the police "homicide squad," with the eager support of governments and the media, has sought to blame individual workers for spreading infection. The early stages of the investigation centred on finding "patient zero" amid the ship's crew, as if the first person to take ill is somehow responsible for the sickness and death of all that follow.

The police investigation will not examine the actions of ABF or NSW Health, but will instead focus on the conduct of the ship's captain and crew. It is highly unlikely that a criminal liability case would ever be brought against Carnival Australia, which owns the Ruby Princess. This is because proving gross negligence by a company requires evidence that the most senior members of the organisation were directly involved.

The other investigation, a special commission of inquiry ordered by NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian commenced last week with two days of hastily organised hearings in which Ruby Princess crew members were interviewed in the final hours before the ship was herded off the Australian coast.

Evidence was heard from three witnesses: the ship's senior doctor, Ilse Von Watzdorf, hotel manager Charles Verwaal, and staff captain Sebastiano Azzarelli.

Both Verwaal and Von Watzdorf contrasted the offloading of passengers in Sydney on March 19 with what had taken place at the conclusion of the ship's previous voyage on March 8. In the earlier case, NSW Health officials boarded the ship, carried out a health assessment and tested a number of passengers for COVID-19 before allowing anyone to leave the vessel.

Verwaal said: "I think we were very surprised that we did not have the same treatment from NSW Public Health as we did on the eighth."

Media coverage of the doctor's testimony seized upon the fact that the Human Health Report submitted to Australian authorities answered no to the question: "Was there any situation on board which may lead to infection or the spread of disease?"

While this seems damning when presented out of context, both Von Watzdorf and the commissioner made clear that the question is a subsection of a part of the form relating to gastrointestinal illness, and would not be reasonably interpreted as having anything to do with an outbreak of coronavirus.

The same form did contain the information that 128 people on board the ship had been ill, 104 with acute respiratory symptoms, and that 24 had temperatures over 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 degrees Fahrenheit).

The doctor also explained that she had spoken to NSW Health to arrange the medical disembarkation of two patients who were experiencing fever and acute respiratory symptoms, and had tested negative for flu. She had specifically mentioned the necessity for paramedics transporting these patients to have proper personal protective equipment.

When the ambulance service contacted Vessel Transport Services, which manages the harbour, for more information about these two patients, the query was initially brushed off as a prank phone call.

The inquiry has now been adjourned indefinitely, after having promoted the insinuations that the ship's crew, rather than the Australian authorities, were responsible for the Ruby Princess outbreak.

Unlike the police investigation, later hearings of the special commission of inquiry will supposedly examine the conduct of state and federal agencies including ABF and the police, but its main purpose is to defuse public outrage over the handling of the ship's return to Sydney.

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