

Stranded by COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of cruise ship workers suffer under horrifying conditions

Tom Casey
14 May 2020

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, dozens of cruise ship passengers and crew have died due to COVID-19. Last month there were 200,000 stranded cruise ship crew members worldwide.

While companies have since begun to slowly enact measures to repatriate their remaining employees in accordance with governmental guidelines, the conditions facing those workers still stuck on board have grown untenable.

Among crew members who remain on ships, there have been four confirmed deaths in the past ten days alone, two of which were from crew going overboard, another two of which the causes have not yet been clarified, but that are widely suspected to have been suicides.

Governments worldwide as well as cruise companies are criminally responsible for the failure to repatriate the upwards of 100,000 ship employees still stranded at sea. The *Miami Herald* reported on April 30 that cruise companies refused to arrange for the repatriation of their stranded employees in accordance with the guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the basis that the requirements were “too expensive.”

Krista Thomas, a former worker on Norwegian cruise lines and the creator and administrator of a social media support group for stranded crew, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the conditions currently facing ship employees.

“Governments are failing these people,” Thomas noted. “From my exchanges with crew members [currently on board], messages have shifted from positive to hopeless and defeated. I now get messages about being in dark, windowless rooms for 60 plus days, missing the birth of a child, the death of a parent or spouses being unfaithful.”

Emma Da Silva, a cruise ship entertainer who has worked for AIDA and Celebrity cruises who is currently out of employment rotation, told the WSWWS, “There were many crew members who were sent to embark ships even in the middle of the initial coronavirus outbreaks, even after all of the guests had been evacuated. Now these employees are simply trapped on board, like prisoners.”

She continued, “AIDA is a German company, so they first made efforts to send all of the German employees home from the ships. Now, crew members of all other nationalities are stuck at sea. A colleague of mine whose wife is currently stranded on the ship that I was supposed to embark said that all onboard public areas are

closed due to social isolation practices. But in order to save on energy costs, the management has also cut off the heating and lighting for these areas as well. The stairwells are being dimly lit by the backup generator system, so it’s a pretty apocalyptic situation.”

“Some of my colleagues even suspect that the company strategically evacuated the German nationals first so that they could control and promote a narrative that portrays AIDA as treating their workers well. In actuality, once most of the German employees were taken care of, everybody else on board got totally screwed.”

Simon Tinauls, a former entertainment worker for Celebrity cruises and the founder of another crew advocacy group in the United Kingdom for stranded cruise ship employees gave the following report to the WSWWS:

“I’ve been told that around 90 percent of ships have been put in conditions of isolation. That is, crew are locked up in their rooms for 21 hours a day, and sometimes even longer than that. They get an hour per day for exercise, and an hour or so for meals. For the most part, if you miss the lunch hour or sleep through it, that’s it—you don’t eat for the day.

“Some crew members are taking it worse than others. Depression is a major issue. Before COVID-19, the longest period that you would expect to stay on the ship without going outside was only a few days at a time. Now, it’s been over two months at sea for some. Tensions are rising among stranded crew right now because information is being withheld. Ships will sometimes go two or three days at a time with no news or updates from the management at all. Anyone who has ever been a crew member before knows that a day or two with no news about going home when you’re supposed to can feel like forever.”

Tinauls continued, “Conditions that ship employees face vary from ship to ship, with so much being determined by each vessel’s captain and his or her personal discretion. The fact that there isn’t a coordinated, consistent response across fleets and companies is really disheartening. I don’t even believe that the cruise corporations have even issued any kind of guidelines as to how things should be run on board.”

The reality is, however, that most cruise companies have shown far more effort in pushing who they deem as “non-essential employees” off of their payrolls than they have in taking sufficient

measures to ensure their repatriation, health and well-being. Despite the fact that many companies have, in an effort to maintain social distancing, berthed their crew in fairly comfortable living quarters, many employees report having had their contracts preemptively terminated, receiving only one-month compensation packages that have been in effect from dates as long ago as mid-March.

“Quite a few crew have told me that they have stopped being paid,” Tinauls explained. “Royal Caribbean, for example, has offered workers a \$400 goodwill payment which wasn’t originally stipulated in their contracts, but for the most part, a lot of stranded crew are now not making any money. That has taken a huge toll on their morale and their well-being.

“We are talking about working people here and they have their own bills to pay at home and a life to look after. But they are stuck on a cruise ship that’s thousands of miles away from where they live. I have had many crew members contact me and tell me that they have no idea how they’re going to pay for their expenses. Furthermore, in the UK, for example, these workers are ineligible for furlough/unemployment benefits since they’re technically contracted, self-employed workers.

“I was informed that several ship companies have also turned off the high-speed internet which is meant for paying passengers. Under normal operating conditions, crew members can access the better connection which provides speeds up to 300 megabits per second for video calling and streaming services. Since the lockdown, many crew are only able to connect to the internet using just a bare-bones connection primarily used for internal operations.”

Referring to the four crew members who have recently died on ships in the past several days, Tinauls said, “A price shouldn’t be put on someone’s mental health, or physical health for that matter. These crew member deaths, and specifically the ones over the past few days, could have quite possibly been prevented. When all the paying guests were sent home in early-March, why weren’t the non-essential crew sent home as well?”

In addition to the horrifying circumstances on board, cruise ship crew are also being subjected to victimization for speaking out against these horrific conditions. According to Thomas, many crew members “are afraid to post [in my social media group] due to fear of retaliation. ... They have been told specifically not to join groups such as mine. I know of a couple who were fired already.”

Da Silva, commenting on the pressure that cruise companies put on their employees to keep quiet about their conditions, explained, “There’s a social media clause in every contract that stipulates that you’re not allowed to speak poorly or post ill about the company on social media while you’re under contract.

“They constantly tell you that you need to portray the company in the best light possible so that guests continue to book cruises so that you’ll continue to have a job. They tell you to tell the guests how much you love working here, and how great it is, but it’s ultimately all put on you. They don’t hold themselves accountable for anything—it’s like they own you while you’re working on board.”

She continued, “I had a colleague who was threatened with disciplinary action for posting on her personal, friends-only

Facebook page that she was disappointed in the way her company handled a separate case involving domestic abuse on a ship. And that was even before the pandemic. Now, I’ve heard horror stories from my other coworkers that captains are issuing ship-wide gag orders to crew members. And these are ships on which people have died from COVID-19. And keep in mind, they’re telling workers to stay silent even after they’ve already released them from their contracts—or at least the parts of their contract that stipulate that they get paid.”

Da Silva is specifically referring to waivers that were issued to many ship employees, switching their employment status to “non-working crew” in exchange for room, board, a fraction of their salary, and an agreement to abide by the company policies. Many crew who signed these waivers would have been unable to be sent home even if they hadn’t agreed to being transferred to “non-working status.”

Speaking of the systemic failure by the capitalist establishment to provide for the needs of these workers, Tinauls expressed a disgust with the fact that the health and safety of crew constantly come into conflict with the financial concerns of both the corporations and the governments.

“Money and politics shouldn’t be coming into play at a time like this. Even though the cruise companies have a responsibility to repatriate their crew, governments also have a duty to their citizens when they are in danger. I’ve had cruise ships workers speak to me saying that some ships are now running out of supplies. Several vegetarian and vegan employees of all nationalities have told me that they’ve been surviving off of a bowl of rice each day. I really can’t imagine a lot worse.”

He continued, “There are always going to be large, unforeseen events that come up in this industry, even if the chances of them happening are only one in a hundred years. This situation brings up the desperate need for an international procedure that ensures that ship employees can be repatriated safely. If there’s another pandemic like this and countries begin to close their borders, there really needs to be a mechanism in place that prevents something like this from ever happening again.”

The crisis facing thousands upon thousands of ship employees requires the reorganization of the leisure and travel industry, as well as society as a whole, to satisfy human need rather than the private profit interests of shareholders. This task can only be advanced by the independent political mobilization of workers in rank and file workplace committees based on a socialist program through the formation of neighborhood, city, state, national and international organs of struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact