

Amid failure by corporations and governments to repatriate employees

Cruise ship workers take action in defiance of company threats

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If you are a cruise ship worker with information you want to share with the WSWs, please contact us.

On Friday, May 15, crew members on board the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's (RCCL) Majesty of the Seas staged a protest on the upper deck of the ship, demanding answers from the captain as to when they would be sent home.

The protest came amidst a crisis in the cruise industry, in which some 200,000 workers worldwide have been stranded at sea as a result of the response by their employers, as well as global governments, to the coronavirus pandemic. As the WSWs reported last week, a large percentage of these crew members have now surpassed their 70th day at sea, many without pay, and some quarantined in rooms with no sunlight or fresh air and with minimal contact with the outside world.

The protest on the Majesty followed a hunger strike by crew members on board RCCL's Navigator of the Seas beginning on May 7, in which 15 workers from Romania refused to eat until the company guaranteed their transit home. One striking worker, speaking anonymously to the *Miami Herald*, noted, "We started this hunger strike because someone needs to do something. [...] The point is our mental health. The mental health is dropping down."

The worker gave their statement in the context of an April 30 incident on RCCL's Jewel of the Seas in which a crew member jumped overboard after remaining stuck on the ship since the beginning of the pandemic. Since the initial *Herald* report, there has been an additional crew member death from jumping

overboard on the Regal Princess, one confirmed suicide on the Carnival Breeze, as well as several non-COVID-19 related deaths on other ships, which are widely suspected to have also been suicides.

Protesters on the Majesty displayed signs reading, "How many more suicides you need?" and "Do you sleep well, M. Bayley?" The latter sign refers to Michael Bayley, the CEO of RCCL, whose spokespersons in prior statements with the *Miami Herald* have complained of the costs of crew repatriation as being "too expensive."

The Majesty of the Seas ship management has already taken action against these protesters. A worker currently on board reported to crew-center.com that the Majesty's security forces telephoned individual crew cabins listing the names of the protesters to all other crew as an intimidation tactic. "It is [a] serious retaliation, and [it goes] against human rights, because all of us, like free people, have [the] right to say our opinion," the worker explained. "We just want [the] world to hear us, because all of us want to be back home with our families."

Another worker onboard the Majesty spoke to the WSWs anonymously, also for fear of retaliation from RCCL. "This was a peaceful protest to express our discomfort and unhappiness with our company," the worker said. "But here on board, courage is not a good thing—people get labeled as trouble-makers for it. If you stand out from the crowd and you are not as obedient as expected, then you're a problem."

Gan Sungaralingum, from Mauritius, a watch specialist for the onboard shops on the stranded Island

Princess, spoke to the WSWs about the conditions faced by crew members worldwide. “In this situation, everyone should be home. Most seafarers are providing for their families. At this time, they should be with their wives, and husbands, their sons, and their daughters.”

Sungaralingum continued, “Both the governments and the cruise industry are responsible for this situation. Authorities, for example, like the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] are allowing ships to come into their waters for fuel and supplies, but few governmental agencies are coordinating a push to have their own nationals returned as soon as possible. Instead, they are only issuing guidelines to the cruise ship companies and therefore, further preventing their own citizens from going home. In response, the cruise companies find really roundabout solutions to repatriating their crew rather than complying with the guidelines and incurring expenses.”

One example of such guidelines were the ones issued by the US Coast Guard in early April, in conjunction with the CDC, forbidding travelers from cruise ships to board commercial flights. Instead, companies would be required to charter private transportation for their employees returning home, at the company’s own expense.

“My girlfriend is a Japanese citizen. We were originally together on the Sky Princess, and then we were separated—they put her on the Emerald Princess after I arrived here on the Island Princess,” Sungaralingum explained. “She is now in Barbados where the ship awaits other stranded crew members, and it is estimated that she will not get home until July. Instead of spending the money to get crew direct flights home, companies are threatening crew for speaking to the press. Meanwhile, we’re mentally and emotionally drained. Just send us home.

“When the pandemic first struck in early-March, all of the borders were open. There was a period in which everybody could have been sent home safely, and inexpensively. Instead, the companies only sent workers home whose contracts were ending soon, while keeping everyone else on board. Every cruise line then reassured everybody, ‘okay, we’re working on getting you home shortly,’ until it was too late.

“The companies have tried to cover their tracks by giving stranded crew members good food, and putting them up in nice, passenger cabins. They’re trying to

blind everybody but they had already failed from the beginning.”

For nearly two months, crew members of all nationalities have experienced obstacle after obstacle to returning home. Between the companies’ blatantly irresponsible policies in regards to keeping ships staffed during the initial outbreak, the bargaining between corporations and port authorities in terms of repatriation expenses, and worldwide governments’ outright refusal to fight for the basic rights of their citizens, the situation facing ship workers is the result of the capitalist system’s failure to provide for the basic needs of the world’s population.

Speaking about the workers’ hunger strike on the Navigator of the Seas, Sungaralingum said, “A lot of people tend to resist struggle for fear of their livelihoods. But we don’t need to fear now because the world is changing. If we stay in these old ways, nothing is ever going to get better, so we need to hear everybody’s voice. People who are afraid of retaliation and not getting to work need to know that if you stay silent, we’re still all going to suffer. Everybody needs to come out in front.”



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