

# Cruise ship workers protest government and cruise line inaction

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Since the industrywide shutdown on March 13 in response to coronavirus pandemic, thousands of cruise ship and maritime workers have been stranded at sea with no foreseeable path to repatriation.

Last week, the WSWS reported on initiatives taken by cruise ship staff to voice their opposition to the inadequate responses by both international governments and cruise ship companies to bring employees home. Such actions included a protest on Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's *Mariner of the Seas*, a hunger strike on the *Navigator of the Seas*, a protest on the German-owned *Mein Schiff 3*, as well as a deluge of stranded workers speaking out to the press, as well as on social media.

This outpouring of opposition came in response to the increasingly desperate situation facing stranded crew members. Last week, there was another crew death on board Virgin's *Scarlet Lady*, as well as a suicide attempt on Cruise & Maritime Voyages' (CMV) *Vasco Da Gama*. In the month of May alone, there have been 8 widely-reported, non COVID-related deaths on marooned ships. All of these deaths have been widely suspected to be suicides.

There have also been over a dozen crew member deaths from COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, according to a memorial page on Crew-Center.com. A Business Insider article dated March 25 states that there had initially been 32 cruise ships with outbreaks of the virus, and further reports of infection on ships continue to emerge.

While some governments and cruise lines have arranged repatriation plans for ship workers after significant delay, thousands still remain trapped on board with no end in sight. The government of Mauritius, under Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, has recently come under furious opposition from its nationals who remain stranded at sea, as it has denied the entry of hundreds of its own citizens into their country. The Colombian government has also

refused to accept a humanitarian flight for stranded crew from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, a major hub for the cruise industry.

Only on Monday did Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte order "all government resources and whatever means of transportation" to be used to assist in bringing home approximately 24,000 Filipino nationals who are either stranded on ships or in shoreside quarantine facilities. According to a *South China Morning Post* report from the same day, "Overseas Filipino Workers, or OFWs, are breadwinners and a key support base for Duterte. Their more than US\$30 billion of annual remittances is a driver of the Philippine economy, sustaining millions of family members."

A May 19 open letter of appeal to the United Nations written by representatives of Friends and Family of Crew Stranded At Sea, an online support group, estimates the number of stranded ship workers to be "80,000 cruise ship employees and 150,000 cargo ship employees. A majority of these cruise ship crew members are not working and cannot get home. They are not being paid in many cases, and in others, the pay is minimal. Cargo ship workers have several crew who are overdue for crew change, living in even more limited conditions and with less resources to advocate for them. Several ships are required by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to sail with stringent restrictions. Level 3 onboard a cruise vessel means that crew has to be in their cabins (some without windows) for 21 hours per day. They can only come out for meals and a fresh air break. They do not all have free Wi-Fi, and they have minimal contact with their families at home."

The letter continues, "[W]e need an international ruling that mandates all countries to accept their own citizens back into their countries regardless of current border restrictions. The blatant refusal of a country to repatriate its own citizens is appalling, it is tearing apart families

and causing severe mental health issues.” As of the writing of this text, the UN has not responded to the appeal.

Miora Cuttaree, a Mauritian crew member who remains stranded on a cruise ship in the Indian Ocean, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the situation: “It’s a total lack of responsibility. My government is not allowing all of the ships to enter the country. They say that they have a protocol worked out with the ship companies, but it doesn’t make any sense. What kind of protocol doesn’t allow citizens to return to their homes? Returning to our country is supposed to be our right. We’re very much all like refugees right now.”

Cuttaree denounced the response of her government to the pandemic as a justification for the ruling class to attack democratic rights and the working class. “They’ve actually used the lockdown as a pretense to pass legislation that cracks down on strikes and protests. Freedom of expression has been completely removed, and the whole population is angry about it.

“Many more people will die under these circumstances, so I don’t understand why governments across the world aren’t able to coordinate to find a solution. Do they think they’re somehow special, or that they don’t have a responsibility for the lives of their own people? We’re all human—this is not about nationality. Survival is a human right.

“For seafarers, we have the ILO (International Labor Organization) and the MLC (Maritime Labour Convention). These unions have specific guidelines and laws for ship labor practices and rights, but there are so many different countries involved in the cruise industry that it’s really easy for these regulations to be disregarded. What we need are stronger international organizations to solve this problem. It’s not just about our working conditions anymore, but the rights of citizens.”

Cuttaree also spoke out against the role that the US government has played in preventing ships from returning workers home. “The CDC and American government aren’t concerned with the human repercussions of their policy. There needs to be a global authority who can enforce safe repatriation for all who are stranded on cruise ships right now. It should not only intervene and issue guidelines for travel home, but also make sure that it happens in a timely manner. The kind of delays that we’ve been experiencing here time and time again are deadly, and completely unacceptable.”

Referencing the longstanding practice by many large cruise corporations in which companies officially register

their brands inside nations presenting more favorable tax laws, Cuttaree noted, “Just as the ship operators fly different flags to evade national taxes, so governments around the world evade their responsibility to care for people in need. How can these huge companies be allowed to avoid paying taxes, but then on the other hand, governments insist that they can’t afford to care for the sick? All of the risk is put entirely on the seafarers and citizens. Why can’t the businesses take on some responsibility?”

“I hope that when the pandemic is over that everything will change. Not only for the cruise industry, but for the whole world. We need to create an institution for international workers—not only just *for* workers, but also *by* workers. It can’t be run by these big companies who are financing a world that ends up making everyone their slaves.”

As governments and corporations worldwide continue to place obstacles on crew returning to their homes, these workers must continue to take their struggle into their own hands. As noted in the WSWS perspective, “The global pandemic and global war on immigrants and refugees,” 177 countries around the world have restricted their borders to international travel in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

“Calls by international institutions like the United Nations and the World Health Organization for global ‘solidarity’ are falling on deaf ears, as far as the capitalist ruling classes are concerned.” The article continues, “the coronavirus pandemic poses the necessity of the working class mobilizing its immense social power independently on the basis of a socialist program, irreconcilably opposed to the economic interests of the capitalist class and the capitalist system as a whole. This requires above all the unification of the working class across national boundaries based upon the strategic perspective of the world socialist revolution.”



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