

Global trade unions issue empty calls for cruise and shipping seafarer action

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On Wednesday, a *Miami Herald* report documented the latest episode in a series of horrific deaths among stranded cruise ship workers who have been stuck at sea with no clear plan for repatriation for over 100 days since the industry shut down on March 13 in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Eddie Burgos Ragodon, a painter on board the Disney Wonder from Las Piñas, Philippines died on Tuesday after reportedly checking in to the ship's medical facilities with chills, according to an account submitted by an anonymous crew member. Although the *Herald* article states that the CDC will test Ragodon's body for COVID-19, it also says that the last positive test result from the nearly 300 confirmed infections on board the Wonder was over a month ago on May 8.

On Wednesday, June 17, there was another report of a non-coronavirus-related death on a cruise ship, Princess Cruise Line's Island Princess, near the coast of Manila, Philippines.

While details surrounding the death of the deceased, Candido Catambay, have not officially been reported, a crew member wrote the following to the cruise worker advocacy group Cruise Law News: "Princess says it's 'natural causes,' but what is natural when you have been kept on board the ship away from home for such a long time and your physical and mental health is damaged day after day."

Earlier on that same day, Krishna Kumar Balaji, a galley cook on Cruise & Maritime Voyages' (CMV) Vasco Da Gama, died of a heart attack while awaiting repatriation to India, according to company reports. Balaji had been recently transferred to this ship from the MV Astoria, on which a protest and a reported hunger strike by Indian crew members had been chronicled by the WSWs days earlier.

Since May, there have been ten widely-reported, non-COVID deaths on stranded ships, among which two have been from crew jumping overboard, two where the causes of death were from hanging, and several more of those have been widely suspected to have been suicides.

When the cruise industry shut down in mid-March, it was estimated that 200,000 cruise ship workers were at sea around the world. The *Herald* now estimates that 28,000 cruise crew still remain stranded on ships. The WSWs has previously reported on the barbaric conditions facing these workers, many of whom are not being paid while in limbo due to the failure of their employers and local governments to provide them safe repatriation.

The crisis facing these workers has compelled major

international labor organizations to threaten minimal action, after more than three months of delay.

An article from Thursday on Lloyd's List by Mark Dickinson, the general secretary of Nautilus International, a major international seafarer union, illustrates that the plight of cruise crew has been the only tip of the iceberg of the broader crisis facing all maritime workers. The article states that there are currently 200,000 stranded commercial seafarers on merchant and shipping vessels worldwide, with 100,000 additional workers awaiting changeover. As with cruise workers, reports abound of shipping crew not being paid while their ships are in limbo and they wait for their relief.

On June 15th, The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) issued a press release entitled "Enough is enough: world's seafarers will now exercise right to leave ships amid Covid-19 failures."

The statement declared that the ITF would "assist hundreds of thousands of seafarers to exercise their right to stop working, leave ships, and return home." While no specific details on strike action were given, the document issued hollow rhetoric from ITF general secretary Steve Cotton, president Paddy Crumlin and seafarers' Section Chair Dave Heindel. "The new approach, which could be highly disruptive to global trade, comes after insufficient action by governments to designate seafarers as 'key workers', exempt them from Covid-19 travel restrictions and facilitate repatriation of around 200,000 seafarers who have been caught up in the crew change crisis [...]"

Late last week, UK Transport Secretary Grant Shapps (Conservative Party) responded to recent warnings by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), that the situation facing seafarers was approaching a "humanitarian crisis" by sending the British Coast Guard (Maritime Coastal Authority/MCA) to six stranded ships in British waters, as the WSWs reported yesterday.

Five of the raided ships were discovered to have had several violations of the International Labour Organization's 2006 Maritime Labor Convention (MLC), also known as The Seafarers' Bill of Rights. The violations included expired contracts, late wages and the holding of crew beyond the established, 11-month contract term limit.

The MLC is commonly seen by thousands of seafarers as a toothless document which contains all of their supposed workplace rights but which is routinely flouted with impunity by shipboard

management. Employees are also pressured to disregard them under threat of retaliation as well as an overarching need to appease the employers who have the power to leverage their future work possibilities.

In a prior interview with the WWS, a stranded Mauritian cruise worker noted, “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.”

Along with last week’s press release, the ITF provided a document intended for seafarers which gives guidelines on their rights according to the MLC, as well as details on its outlined grievance procedures.

The grievance processes requires an individual seafarer to seek resolution first with shipboard management. Then, if no satisfactory outcome is reached, the seafarer has the right to issue the complaint to the Port State Control Inspector, who, upon an unsuccessful resolution of the issue, has the power to detain the ship and advance the concern to the ship’s owner, its “flag state,” as well as worldwide labor organizations.

In this context, the Port State Control Inspector means the maritime authority of whichever national jurisdiction a grieved worker’s ship falls under, itself a determination which can be influenced by the discretion of management and the company. The “flag state” indicates the national government under whose authority the ship in question operates, referring to a decades-long convention by operators to fly on their vessels flags of countries which provide favorable tax and labor laws.

In other words, workers facing untenable conditions could potentially have to consult with government agents of multiple countries of which they are not even citizens before seeing resolution to workplace issues. Furthermore, the grievance procedures of the MLC, as well as other regulations by industry labor organizations completely fail to provide any recourse for sailors in the event of a meltdown of international economic and political relations.

Calls to action by the ITF and IMO, organizations which are tied to capitalist national alliances as well as employer associations, must be rejected by seafaring workers as completely bankrupt and fraudulent.

Seafarer’s Rights International (SRI), an organization associated with the IMO and the United Nations (UN), gives the following information on their website to seafarers concerning their legal right to repatriation as outlined by the MLC. “[The MLC] entitles you to free repatriation in these circumstances: 1.) your employment agreement expires whilst you are abroad, 2.) it is terminated by yourself ... 3.) you can no longer carry out your duties ... or 4.) if the shipowner does not fulfill their legal obligations toward you anymore — for example, due to insolvency. ... Ships must provide financial security for repatriation. If the shipowner fails to pay for repatriation, the flag state must take over the responsibility.”

Under circumstances in which cruise companies have already delayed their employees’ rightful repatriation for over three months, with Royal Caribbean International at one point letting it slip that it felt as though the CDC’s repatriation requirements were

“too expensive,” the MLC provisions outlined by the SRI only serve as a damning implication of international labor organizations’ complacency in the face of their own laws being flouted.

Even by Dickinson’s own admission in his Thursday Lloyd’s List editorial, the reality is that flag states have absolutely no incentive to uphold whatever obligations they have to international seafarer protection laws. Referring to Tuesday’s announcement by the Ship Registry of Panama, a country with approximately 9,000 registered ships, that it intended to extend maximum term lengths for seafarer contracts to 17 months, Dickinson wrote, “such is the nature of the ship registration business, for that is what it is. It is run for commercial gain rather than the [fulfillment] of the states’ obligations that derive from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

“Panama appears to be recklessly flouting the Maritime Labour Convention 2006,” he noted. “Its ships should therefore be targeted by port state control, inspected for deficiencies under the MLC, and detained if they do not meet international minimum standards including those relating to Seafarers’ Employment Agreements.” Dickinson concludes that “the line between the denial of workers’ rights and forced labour is a thin one. Panama has just made crossing that line an inevitability.”

In other words, Dickinson, the general secretary of an international labor union which claims to represent over 20,000 of the world’s seafarers, throws up his hands and declares that the life-or-death problem of hundreds of thousands of imperiled ship workers facing the obstacle of the capitalist nation-state system, simply put, “is what it is.”

The WWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) oppose the ideologically bankrupt trade union leadership. Whereas these organizations are closely tied to the global capitalist elites and their political representatives in worldwide governments, the ICFI supports the independent mobilization of seafaring workers.

No solution to the crisis facing this section of the international working class exists within the framework of the nation-state system, which is increasingly rife with explosive tensions. We urge crew of all positions and nationalities to form rank-and-file committees across all ships, fleets and industries to organize the broadest possible action in the fight for workers’ rights to safe repatriation, compensation for lost wages and damages, and the ability to carry out future work under the safest possible conditions. The logical outcome of this struggle is the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by international socialism.

We appeal to all seafaring workers seeking to take up the struggle for socialism to contact us today.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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