

New COVID-19 infections take hold in first week of attempted cruise industry restart

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While the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) ban on cruise ship sailings, combined with the Cruise Line Industry Association's (CLIA) voluntary industry suspension will remain in effect until the end of September, several European cruise and ferry enterprises have recently begun to resume scaled-down operations. These initiatives mark the beginning of a wave of attempts at a "phased" reopening since its shutdown in March due to the coronavirus.

The new sailing efforts come within the context of the ongoing failure of cruise companies and governments to repatriate thousands of ship workers since spring. As the WSWs has documented, thousands of stranded employees have remained stuck at sea for months, pushed off of company payroll, unable to meet their expenses at home, and having little information about when they will be reunited with their families. Since May, there have been nearly a dozen non-COVID-19-related deaths which are widely suspected to have been suicides.

A press release by the CDC calculates that as of July 10 there were 14,702 crew remaining on board 67 ships in US waters. The report also declares that there have been 99 disease outbreaks on 123 different cruise ships, with a total of 2,973 "COVID-19 or COVID-like illness cases" and 34 deaths. While the CDC release only refers to vessels under the US Coast Guard's tally, there are likely thousands more stranded crew members on dozens of ships worldwide.

Among the first ship operators to resume sailings was Hurtigruten, a Norwegian-owned cruise and ferry company specializing in "scenic cruising," or voyages which dock at fewer ports of call in favor of itineraries that do not require passengers to leave the ship. This weekend, Hurtigruten announced that it would suspend

its recently resumed operation of the MS Fridtjof Nansen and the MS Roald Amundsen, after 36 passengers and five crew on board the latter tested positive for COVID-19.

AIDA cruises, a German brand operated by Costa Cruise Lines (Italy), a subsidiary of the Carnival Corporation/Carnival UK group (US/UK), also announced this weekend that it would be unable to continue its plans to restart passenger operations out of German ports for the first week of August.

On Wednesday, July 22, 750 Filipino and Indonesian crew members arrived in the port of Rostock, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in order to join the AIDamar and AIDablu ships for planned employee-only voyages. These sailings were scheduled in order for the company to implement its newly updated onboard health and safety procedures. Prior to boarding, however, 10 crew members tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Following the isolation of the infected workers, the company issued the following statement: "None [of the confirmed cases] are related to the regular on-board operations. ... The entire arriving crew was tested in their home countries before their departure to Germany. Another PCR test was carried out directly prior to the boarding. [This] shows that the strict hygiene protocols AIDA Cruises has developed with the authorities are effective and that the company has taken the right preventive measures."

The company blamed the government of Italy, the flag state for all ships in its fleet, for its inability to carry out planned cruises. The Italian government neglected to give its final approval to the company's voyages out of Rostock and Hamburg.

Last week, the *Miami Herald* reported on a memo leaked in social media groups by employees of MSC

Cruises. The document presented updated protocol for all shipboard workers upon the resumption of the company's sailings. A bullet point which banned all "non-emergency" shore leave for crew sparked widespread opposition, as the ability for employees to leave the ship during normal operation is a necessary component of a job in which long work hours and no days off are a prominent feature.

While MSC Cruises is the world's fourth largest cruise company, it is the world's largest cruise operator that is a privately-held company. While the Switzerland-registered enterprise has officially stated that it awaits the approval of local health agencies before it resumes its sailing, it has acknowledged that it has begun the process of bringing employees to locations where the ships are docked in preparation for reopening.

While the company recklessly moves ahead with its plans, dozens of its crew still remain imprisoned on its vessels around the world. A Mauritian worker on a stranded MSC ship who wished to remain anonymous confirmed with the WSWs that the company has been chartering flights to send Mauritian crew to Genoa, Italy, in preparation of its resumed sailings.

"This is outrageous. I've been waiting to go home since the end of March. It's really hard to survive like this," the crew member said, concluding, "it should be a fundamental right for any citizen to return home."

The response to the coronavirus pandemic by the Mauritian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, has been a particularly naked expression of the self-serving calculations of the country's national business elite, as the WSWs has reported. Weeks after it implemented a shakedown policy in the form of expensive travel restrictions on its citizens returning from abroad, the Mauritian ruling class has demonstrated that it will spare no account in meeting the needs of the tourism industry—it merely seeks to reap a better price for doing so.

On July 25, TUI cruises, owned by Royal Caribbean, Ltd., (US) through TUI AG, a German tourism company, became the first European ship operator to sail a large cruise vessel since the industry shutdown. "Mein Schiff 2," a 2,900-passenger ship filled with only 60 percent of its operating capacity sailed on a scenic, three-day voyage to Norwegian waters with no ports of call.

A telling report from *New York Daily News* last week

painted a chilling picture of the cold calculations involved the resumption of the cruising industry. The reopening will inevitably be built on the prolonged misery of employees who are financially desperate from a prolonged period without work. The report states, "after months of shutdowns, the German cruise ship industry is betting on shorter trips to help reignite the business, which was badly affected by the ongoing coronavirus crisis. ... The Western European nation of 83 million has been widely seen as a success in the fight against COVID-19, with just over 206,000 cases and 9,201 fatalities, about one-fifth of the death toll in the U.K."

Put in plain language, cruise corporations around the world see potential outbreaks of illness onboard, and whatever personal damages or deaths that may result, as a secondary factor to the resumption of business operations and the accumulation of their profits.

Cruise crew should categorically reject any return to work under the deadly conditions which are being pushed by the international cruise and ferry corporations. The right to safe repatriation must be demanded by ship workers as a basic prerequisite for any and all resumption of cruising operations.

Seafarers who are stranded on ships, those who are on active duty, and those who are at home with or without future assignments must form rank and file organizations to ensure that no restart of the industry is possible under the current conditions. These committees must be connected with similar organs of struggle in factories, schools, neighborhoods and workplaces around the world as part of the broader struggle by the working class to transform society on the basis of its own class interests—that is, of international socialism.



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