

Facebook shuts down group with 90,000 cruise ship crew members

Tom Casey
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On Friday, an online Facebook Group with approximately 90,000 cruise ship employee members entitled “The Crew Bar” was shut down by the social media company. Moderators received no prior warning or explanation and were only sent a message which read, “Your group has been disabled. This is because it goes against our Community Standards on dangerous individuals and organizations. We have these standards to prevent and disrupt offline harm.”

“The Crew Bar” group name is taken from officially-designated, employee-only recreational facilities in crew living quarters aboard typical cruise ships. The page intended to be an online simulation of this unique social environment. Its purpose was to enable members of the hundreds of thousands-strong, international cruising workforce to stay in touch with one another, share important workplace information and news, and primarily, to socialize.

While there are several similar such groups and pages on Facebook that have been created by and for seafarers, “The Crew Bar” was the largest and most broad-based. Whereas the other groups tend to be oriented to specific crew nationality or employer, the former was used as an all-inclusive platform for ship workers across all companies and nationalities to share their experiences working at sea.

During the initial phases of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent global shutdown of cruising—which left hundreds of thousands of crew members marooned for months—the page functioned as an emotional support group for those who were stranded and concerned about the future of their livelihood in the wake of the collapse of the industry. It also supported those who were nostalgic for better days working at sea.

After the fate of the *Diamond Princess*—a 4,000-capacity vessel in which a coronavirus outbreak caused nearly 700 infections and 14 deaths in February 2020—what ensued was appropriately deemed a “humanitarian crisis” by former Holland America Line CEO Orlando Ashford.

A subsequent study conducted by the *Miami Herald* in the spring of 2020, and updated in July, estimated that there had been roughly 1,770 positive COVID-19 cases among guest passengers and a similar number among ship employees within 14 different cruise companies sailing in the early days of the pandemic. The report stated there were approximately 111

COVID-related deaths on ships in the first half of 2020.

While guests disembarked from ships globally by late March 2020, international restrictions on travel combined with the failure of cruise companies to comply with various national travel policies quickly escalated into a desperate situation with over 200,000 ship employees stranded across the globe.

At that time, the *World Socialist Web Site* played a leading role in exposing the horrendous conditions faced by this section of the working class. Thousands of crew members spent months in captivity with no earthly idea of when they would return home. A majority of these workers had also been cut off of company payroll and were both unable to go home to their families and unable to work to pay for their expenses.

Between March and May, nearly a dozen non-COVID-related deaths were reported on several stranded, crew-only ships. These deaths were either confirmed as suicides or were widely suspected by crew to have been suicides.

By the fall of last year, ship employees had taken several actions to fight for their right to be repatriated including protests, hunger strikes and written appeals to the United Nations, international news agencies, global maritime trade unions and other humanitarian organizations. It was not until November 2020 that Carnival Corporation, the world’s largest cruise operator, announced that it had finally returned all but a tiny handful of about 30 crew members.

Recalling his experience of being stranded on ship for over half of last year, a former crew member told the WSWs, “This was actually a crime committed against all of us. It was very much like being in prison. Even though the companies put us in nice living quarters during this time, we were being held without our consent. And also, we weren’t getting paid, so the company was actually stealing months of our time. When I’m on the ship, my time doesn’t belong to me, it belongs to the company. So, if you stop paying me and hold me against my will, it’s both wrongful imprisonment and theft.”

In addition to having suffered through the trauma of being stranded at sea for several months with no pay, thousands of crew members now face the devastating economic impact of the complete destruction of their industry. Bari Golin-Blaugrund, Vice President of Strategic Communications and Public Affairs of the Cruise Line Industry Association (CLIA),

gave a statement in November 2020 and presented the figures on the number of jobs lost by the cruise industry shutdown. She said, “From mid-March through the end of this year, it is estimated that the suspension of cruising in the US will result in a loss of more than \$32 billion in economic activity and more than 254,000 American jobs.”

Considering that cruise corporations commonly employ maritime workers from around the world, Golin-Blaugrund has presented an incomplete picture. For example, the Philippines has a large percentage of seafarers in its workforce and had 24,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who were “either stranded on ships or in shoreside quarantine facilities” by late May 2020. In April 2020, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, another country with a high population of cruise ship workers, said that 11,505 cruise ship crew had been returned to the country after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The disabling of “The Crew Bar” comes amidst Facebook’s recently announced program of depoliticizing its platform for its nearly three billion users, as well as the banning of all news sources in Australia. These moves come as a part of a broader effort by the social media giant to monitor, track and shut down “inauthentic behavior” on its platform. In the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential elections, major tech monopolies including Facebook, Google and Twitter—falling in line with the narrative of “Russian meddling” promoted by the American Democratic Party establishment—announced the strengthening of censorship and content-restricting initiatives.

On January 27 of this year, on a call with investors to review the company’s fourth quarter financials, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the following: “... this is a continuation of work we’ve been doing for a while to turn down the temperature and discourage divisive conversation and communities. Now, along these same lines, we’re also currently considering steps that we can take to reduce the amount of political content in News Feed ... We’re still working through exactly the best ways to do this. And to be clear, of course, we’re still going to enable people to engage in political groups and discussions if they want to.”

There is no doubt that “The Crew Bar” is a victim of Facebook’s program of political censorship. In a display of the tremendous popular support for “The Crew Bar,” a replacement group was quickly created which reached over 13,500 members within 48 hours. “I think it’s heartbreaking that ‘The Crew Bar’ was shut down,” a former cruise ship worker who had been a member of the original group told the WSWS. “There was nothing wrong with what the group was doing ... it actually brought people together. For crew and ex-crew, we already had an emotionally tough lifestyle. Even before the pandemic it was common for a lot of us to have really dark thoughts.”

The crew member continued, “people go to work on ships to learn new things, meet people from all over the world and find themselves. And the group was ultimately a system of support for that. I don’t agree that Facebook should have prevented a community of 90,000 people from speaking to one another.

Certainly not without any warning or explanation. Everyone was already so divided and torn apart by the nature of this industry. There was no reason to take away that line of communication. Especially not during a pandemic.”

Despite what these media conglomerates and the American state may claim, it is clear that the ultimate aim of these censorship measures is not the protection of safety—least of all that of democratic rights. Rather, the ultimate outcome of this broader initiative is the political censorship of left-wing ideas, criticism and assembly, with which the capitalist ruling class does not agree, and furthermore, cannot tolerate.

The WSWS has been at the center of the major social media companies’ effort to suppress online free speech, as well as the resistance against internet censorship. In November of last year, Google CEO Sundar Pichai admitted in a Senate hearing to the censorship of the WSWS on its search engine platform.

This followed an ongoing investigation by the WSWS—beginning in 2017—that showed Google had been systematically de-ranking content by the WSWS as well as several other left-wing news sources. The WSWS published an open letter to Google in opposition to its political blacklisting, and launched a campaign calling for an international coalition of mass organizations against online censorship.

In January of 2021, Facebook carried out a politically-motivated attack on the WSWS and its affiliated organizations. Leading members of the Socialist Equality Party’s editorial board, the University of Michigan Chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), as well as the London Bus Driver’s Rank-and-File Safety Committee all had their Facebook account pages suspended with no explanation given or an option to appeal.

In response, the WSWS launched a counter-campaign to expose and denounce the acts of political suppression which received broad support. These resulted in the reversal of the bans, which, in the case of the University of Michigan IYSSE, Facebook claimed was the result of an “automation error.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact