

“These pirates are only there to create wealth for themselves”

Crew death, contract cancellations mark cruise industry restart

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The most recent dash to resume luxury cruise sailings after a year-long shutdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has already claimed the life of a crew member. Last week, Cruise Law News (CLN), an organization which provides legal help to victims of industry malpractice, reported a crew suicide on the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line (RCCL) *Odyssey of the Seas* on Tuesday evening.

Although details including the name of the worker have not been released, the article, citing anonymously submitted crew reports, claims that the employee was a man from India who jumped overboard. *Cruisemapper.com*, a cruise industry publication, has also reported the worker’s death as a suicide.

Also last week, RCCL announced the suspension of the contracts of all crew members from India. Approximately 300 Indian employees who had traveled to their ports of embarkation last week were informed by RCCL that they would be unable to join their assigned ships. According to *Crew-Center.com*, a news source run by former cruise ship workers, the company stated that it would provide accommodations for all crew sent abroad while their contracts were temporarily canceled.

RCCL cited travel restrictions to and from India, which are related to the ongoing COVID-19 surge which is devastating the country. As of Sunday, the country’s seven day moving average for new infections was just over 370,000, representing a shattering of global highs across several categories for multiple days in a row. The most recent daily coronavirus death count is reported at over 3,300 while reports of hospitals being overwhelmed, shortages of oxygen and crematoriums operating at capacity abound.

In response to the country’s COVID-19 surge, several airlines in countries including the US, Canada, UK and Australia announced the suspension of flights from India. On April 19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an advisory warning against “all travel to India.” On Friday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki announced that the Biden administration would begin to restrict travel from the country starting next week.

Until only recently, the luxury cruising industry has been on an effective hiatus since the outbreak of the pandemic in mid-March of 2020. When the virus was allowed to rage uncontrolled on several different vessels, including the infamous case of the *Diamond Princess* off of the coast of Japan, several passengers

died and many more became infected. This crisis was exacerbated as governments worldwide placed restrictions on international travel, complicating routine and emergency disembarkation procedures.

After the evacuation of all paying customers, approximately 200,000 ship employees were stranded, with most pushed off of company payroll. The situation was prolonged until the fall of last year, with many crew members having been stuck at sea away from their families for over ten months.

Despite the surge of new cases of COVID-19 to an all-time global high, there has been a renewed drive to resume the operations of the major cruise companies. With the initial, still limited distribution of vaccines as a pretext, politicians in the US have taken—doubtlessly in collaboration with the industry profiteers—a series of political and legal maneuvers to force a reopening.

In early April, Republican Florida Governor Ron Desantis announced that his government would file a lawsuit against the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in order to force the agency to remove its meager restrictions on cruise ship operations. On April 20, Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy, also a Republican, announced that his government would join the litigation. Earlier in the month, Desantis appeared in a press conference with the major cruising executives.

The health and safety of passengers and maritime workers is of the least concern to Desantis. The Florida governor oversaw one of the earliest lifting of COVID-19 restrictions which led to an explosion of new infections, notably among younger individuals.

Dr. Michael Callahan, a major US epidemiologist who was involved in the emergency evacuation of the *Diamond Princess* last year, recently told the *Miami Herald* about public health risks of cruising during a pandemic. He cited particular concern over new COVID-19 variants spreading to countries where capacity for testing and vaccine distribution are low.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) extensively followed the experience of crew who were stranded on marooned ships last year. Reports were widespread of employees having inadequate and conflicting information about when they would be repatriated. Shipboard management shifted blame entirely onto the CDC and various governmental health agencies for the delay while the situation wreaked personal and financial disaster on the workers’

lives.

Many employees reported feelings of extreme anxiety and depression. Between May and September of 2020, there were nearly a dozen non-COVID related deaths among crew on stranded cruise ships, which were widely thought to have been suicides. In several cases, it was only after cruise workers began to stage protests, demonstrations and strikes that companies took immediate action to repatriate their employees.

The pandemic and subsequent shutdown of the industry without compensation for crew lead to the devastation of hundreds of thousands in this section of the working class. The Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association estimates that in 2015, the global cruise industry accounted for nearly a million jobs, paying approximately \$38 billion in wages and salaries while the industry was steadily growing.

In addition to having axed their shipboard employees in the 2020 shutdown, all of the major cruise operators also announced hundreds of layoffs to their shoreside workforce. While presenting austerity to their workers, these companies took full advantage of capital liquidity provided to banks by American relief bills and stimulus packages, paying their top executives handsomely.

The *Miami Herald* reported Tuesday that “even as the companies faced record losses in the billions, company boards rewarded CEOs with multimillion-dollar payouts. Carnival CEO Arnold Donald and Norwegian CEO Frank Del Rio made more in 2020 than in 2019. Only Royal Caribbean Chairman and CEO Richard Fain was paid less in 2020 than in 2019.”

The report continued, “For two cruise companies, the CEO-to-worker pay ratio increased during the pandemic. Norwegian reported Del Rio made 1,188 times the median employee at the company, and Royal Caribbean reported Fain made 1,395 times the median employee at the company...Only Carnival Corp. closed the gap slightly. The company reported Donald made 490 times the median employee in 2020.”

In the past year, cruise ship employees have faced tremendous uncertainty about their futures. Attempts to resume sailings by major lines have been marred by frequent and sporadic false starts due to incongruities between company and port health protocols, the revoking of onboard and shore crew privileges, as well as occasional COVID-19 outbreaks among crew despite strict testing and quarantine regimes.

With many crew suffering from the trauma of being held at sea indefinitely with their livelihoods decimated, a tremendous sense of anxiety and personal disorientation pervades among these workers as they are forced to forge new lives in the wake of the destruction of their industry.

The scathing comments on CLN’s Facebook page in response to the news of last month’s crew death illustrate the tremendous opposition by these workers to their conditions and mistreatment by the companies. One worker wrote, “I remember after [September 11, 2001] and they froze our wages saying they weren’t making any money. Yet the ships were full, they were adding new funnels to all the ships and of course all the big wigs got their bonuses.” Another commenter responded to the worker’s observation, “[you’re] an old timer, you have made more money than people working today.”

Another commenter wrote, “Nothing has changed. The CEOs in South Florida are living the life of GREED and the little people get nothing.”

“In my opinion all this and much worse (like the miserable food), come from the greed of the cruise companies, who have no respect for their crew and especially for the lower ones,” wrote another.

“While cruise executives take thousands, billions of dollars, HARD WORKING CREW are struggling to find food for their families’ tables. What a shame, for washy washy cruise lines.”

Another user wrote, “these pirates are there for one purpose only—to create wealth for themselves.” Pointing out that maritime labor unions, while claiming to represent the crew, make secret negotiations with management behind the backs of the workers, the commenter wrote, “some international unions like Norwegian Seafarer’s Union (NSU) even join forces with these pirates without the crew members’ knowledge, receiving union fees, claiming that they are negotiating salary for the crew under the name of the ‘Collective Bargaining Agreement.’ It is doubtful that the crew members even know about this. It is being done so that the pirates can claim that they follow the International Labor Organization Convention concerning freedom of organizations for the crew...”

A former crew member who spent months stranded on a ship last year spoke with the WSWS about the death of the crew member on the RCCL Odyssey. “It’s so sad to hear. My agent contacted me to join a ship in a few weeks, but I refused. I know I’ll need to go back eventually, because it’s better money than I could ever make in my home country, but I won’t return until things are totally normal.”

Another former ship employee told the WSWS, “I strongly believe RCCL should not bring crew members on board. New COVID variants are found in different countries like the UK, South Africa and now recently, India. The vaccines alone are inefficient for this situation. They should stop this stupidity of putting peoples’ lives in danger again.”



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