

Stranded Seafarers/Crew Change Crisis Plea - Part Two

Dear ECMC Colleagues and Friends,

As those of you that attended our last meeting know, I have engaged in attempting to influence behaviors that will bring about relief to seafarers/crew who are victim to the COVID 19-induced crew change humanitarian crisis. International maritime organizations still estimate that around 300,000 seafarers are not able to disembark ships to repatriate home, and another 300,000 are not able to return to employment aboard ships.

Since our August meeting, ECMC has written to the U.S. Maritime Administrator, Rear Admiral Buzby encouraging MARAD and other cognizant U.S. government agencies to actively support resolution of the crisis for U.S. mariners and the mariners of all nations. Specifically, we encouraged U.S. support of efforts to raise the crew change crisis at meetings on this subject conducted during the recently concluded UN General Assembly session. Both the ECMC letter and MARAD's response are posted on the ECMC website. Also posted there is a September 23rd letter signed by 31 Consumer Goods Forum member company executives to the UN General Secretary suggesting specific actions by UN member countries to help facilitate crew change. To my knowledge, this was sadly the only cargo owner interest group to speak out during UN general assembly meetings.

My earlier plea to ECMC members included bringing visibility to the risks to safety, human life, and the sustainability of marine environments and global supply chains this crisis has created. Seafarers/crew, essentially imprisoned within their workplace aboard ships due various employer or governmental constraints prohibiting their repatriation, are suffering both physical and mental fatigue. Many are well beyond their contracted employment period and are unable or effectively forbidden from disembarking the ships they serve on. This is causing a risk to their own personal health, safety and well-being, as well as the safety and well-being of fellow crew members. It is also posing a risk to life and the environment should their fatigue affect job performance to the extent of triggering a marine accident at sea or within a port. Lastly, as the crisis carries on, risk to the sustainability of global supply chains increases with the possibility of marine accidents, or should seafarers decide to take matters into their own hands via work disruptions, and thus finally forcing employers and governments to earnestly address the crisis. None of these are good outcomes. None of these are things that we normally even think about. Many of us, me included, have for years simply taken for granted what seafarers/crew do for us every day in serving our needs as something that just happens, uninterrupted and without need for our concern.

So, what can we do towards helping to resolve the crisis using the authority we possess as shippers (the cargo owners and their forwarders) who initiate the movement of cargo and/or pay the freight bill?

1-Follow the lead of Consumer Goods Forum Supply Chain/Logistics professionals by raising awareness of the crisis to management within our work discipline and at the highest levels of the company. To not voice concern is a choice permitting the injustice to seafarers/crew to continue unabated. It is also a failure of duty by not informing management of the possible risks to supply chains in advance of a possible disruption, due to the crisis.

2-Bring visibility to the crisis by raising concerns within your network of contacts, industry associations, and with relevant government authorities such as Immigration, Customs, and Port State Control.

3- Tell your ocean carriers you want to see their policy statement addressing the facilitation of crew change. Plus, make crew change facilitation an element of your carrier vetting and selection process by rewarding those that are actively addressing the crew change crisis and thus mitigating the associated risks with you.

4- Insist on knowing if the vessel your cargo will move on has seafarers/crew on board that are involuntarily serving beyond their employment contract terms and pursuing repatriation.

5- Consider negotiating a crew change deviation clause into your charter agreements should an opportunity present itself during the course of the voyage for the vessel owner or operator to assist crew members seeking appropriate repatriation which has been delayed beyond limits by the crisis.

Thank you for listening and caring about this issue with me. Please don't hesitate to reach out if I can address concerns or questions.

Dennis Mottola