

## Crews mark Day of the Seafarer between a rock and a hard place as crew change crisis continues to brew

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Photo credit: Asociación de Navieros Españoles – ANAVE

**As the shipping industry marks this year's Day of the Seafarer, hundreds of thousands of seafarers continue to face challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to repatriation, shore leave, and medical support.**

*“After a year of seafarer mistreatment by governments and ineffective lobbying on their behalf by the shipping industry, stronger action is now needed as the industry marks Day of the Seafarer 2021 on June 25,”* **Captain Rajesh Unni**, Founder and CEO of Synergy Group, commented.

Based on the latest collective industry analysis, around 200,000 seafarers are currently affected by the crew change crisis, considerably lower than 400,000 that needed to be repatriated at the height of the crisis.

Data from the Global Maritime Forum shows that the crisis is worsening: the number of seafarers working over their contracts has grown from 5.8% in May 2021 to 7.4% in June.

What is more, seafarer abandonment cases have hit a record high during the pandemic, leaving crews without pay and in terrible working conditions on board ships for months and even years.

“*Seafarers cannot survive on platitudes. The ships sounding their horns today are letting national governments know that the world is watching,*” *Esben Poulsson, Chairman of the Board at ICS.*

Recent figures [released by the ITF](#) show that 60 new cases were lodged by the union of the record 85 cases which appeared in the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) abandonment database in 2020.

Just 34 cases were reported to the ILO in 2018, with a slight rise to 40 in 2019. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of cases more than doubled, with the 85 last year representative of hundreds of seafarers who were owed repatriation flights, more than two months’ wages, or both.

Furthermore, the ITF and its inspectors [recovered almost \\$45 million last year for seafarers](#) from employers who didn’t pay them.

The unprecedented crew change crisis remains a hot potato for governments across the world, with limited progress made to facilitate seafarers’ travel as key workers, especially as new COVID variants continue to emerge.

Furthermore, vaccination of seafarers remains sporadic with very few global nations offering inoculation for national and international seafarers, such as the U.S., Belgium, and the Netherlands, with many others lagging behind with the rollout, especially developing nations which account for around 900,000 seafarers.

Captain Unni believes there are simple steps political leaders can take to uphold seafarers’ human rights and bring some order to the Covid-related national rules that are now often making it difficult to ensure crews receive emergency treatment and vaccines

The ITF insists the world’s governments can:

1. *start* actively supporting the TRIPS vaccine patent waiver being considered by government representatives at the WTO

2. *purchase* and distribute enough vaccine doses to fully vaccinate all seafarers who are **due to visit those ports by the end of 2021, offering every single seafarer the opportunity to be vaccinated**
3. **purchase and distribute enough vaccine doses to fully vaccinate all seafarers who work on vessels** by the end of 2021. If a flag state can't get doses to all the vessels they are responsible for, they should partner with governments who can
4. *introduce* permanent 'green lane' exemptions for vaccine-certified seafarers to get to and from ships as part of crew changes
5. *restore* visiting seafarers' rights to shore leave and medical assistance
6. *scrap* bans on repatriating seafarers' bodies to their grieving families
7. *publish* accurate information about how seafarers can access both vaccines and their restored rights online, in plain English

Many countries are even banning the repatriation of the mortal remains of seafarers that pass away at sea, irrespective of the cause of death or the Covid-19 status of those on board the vessel.

The problem became apparent with the tragic case of the Romanian captain of the Vantage Wave, who passed away on April 19 after suffering a suspected heart attack. There were no suspected Covid-19 complications. However, efforts to repatriate his body were thwarted by lockdown regulations.

*“Human Rights at Sea reported that efforts were made to disembark the captain in a number of Asian countries, but permission could not be obtained. Almost two months later and the body was still on the ship and crew were facing food and water shortages at anchorage off China. This is not right,”* he said.

*“And this was not a one-off event. According to the International Transport Workers’ Federation, since March 2020 the bodies of at least 10 seafarers who died at sea have been held on ships and denied disembarkation to repatriate the remains, causing great additional grief for their friends and families. None of the seafarers died because of Covid-19.”*

Finding the means of getting treatment for sick seafarers is often all but impossible, irrespective of any Covid-19 infections on board, he continued.

*“We have had several cases when Synergy-managed ships which have been made to wait for several days for emergency medical attention for crew,”* he said.

Finally, the industry is urging the IMO to work with WHO to expedite vaccination programs for seafarers and enable health workers to distribute vaccines on board ships for places where shore leave is denied.

Therefore, the theme selected for this year ‘a future fair for seafarers’ doesn’t really represent the state in the industry as the outlook paints a rather grim picture with many seafarers likely to leave the sector.

As reported earlier, ITF research shows that a quarter of seafarers were considering quitting the industry already due to the ongoing crew change crisis and another 23 percent of seafarers were unsure about their future, suggesting a seafarer supply crunch was looming.

This is extremely important to highlight since the journey the shipping industry is embarking upon will require fresh new talent with sophisticated education and skills.

Namely, the shipping industry’s transition into a greener, more sustainable future will require a fundamental change of its approach to recruiting as well.

With ships expected to become more complex the requirements for seafarers and officers are increasing in complexity as well.

With this transition, better working conditions and faster and easier career advancement are expected to ensue bringing more work and life balance.

Therefore, the time has come for swift action on clearing the sector’s image if the industry wants to remain competitive and attractive for new generations of professionals.

*“In my 50 years in the maritime industry, the crew change crisis has been unprecedented in the devastating impact it has had on seafarers around the world,”* **Esben Poulsen, Chairman of the Board at ICS**, said.

*“We cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the plight of hundreds of thousands of seafarers. All nations have benefited from their sacrifice throughout the pandemic. Those same nations have a duty to prioritise seafarers for vaccinations and keep their word to allow crew changes.”*

*“We will be feeling the ripple effects of this crisis for years to come, but today, governments have a chance to take meaningful action to protect both seafarers and global trade. They must seize it.”*

Vessels in ports across the globe are scheduled to sound their horns at 12 noon local time today to draw attention to the crisis and seek action on their plights.

The unions insist the best way to thank seafarers and appreciate their sacrifice was to help restore their human rights and seek action from governments.