

Vaccination, Crew Change Remain Top Priorities on Day of the Seafarer



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On June 25, the Day of the Seafarer, the world maritime community turns its attention to the mariners who keep 80-90 percent of global trade moving. Like last year, the day's focus remains on the challenges that seafarers face due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For shoreside populations in the West, the worst of the public health crisis appears to have passed: vaccines are widely available; infection rates are down; restaurants have reopened; travel restrictions have lifted; and office work has resumed. For seafarers, the picture is not so simple.

"For over a year the shipping industry has been pleading for leadership from political leaders to help us find ways of running our businesses and treating seafarers with the respect they deserve," said Captain Rajesh Unni, founder and CEO of Synergy Group, which manages a fleet of about 400 vessels. "Another Day of the Seafarer is upon us and thus far our pleas have largely fallen on deaf ears."

Ship managers and seafarers' rights advocates report that access to vaccination is still difficult in many regions, more than a year after the pandemic shutdowns began. Changing national restrictions on disembarkation and travel are still making crew changes a challenge - particularly when the oncoming seafarers hail from a nation with an active outbreak.

According to Unni, getting access to care for seafarers who fall ill - even for non-COVID causes - can mean navigating far off the planned course in order to reach a port that will accept the victim for treatment. The same difficulty has been encountered for the repatriation of remains of seafarers who pass away while on board; in one case, multiple port states refused to repatriate a captain's remains, forcing the operator to set a course directly for the deceased's country of origin.

"These are the people, key workers, who are keeping nations fed and warm. They are supplying the parts and equipment that are facilitating economic rebounds. Yet when they get sick they are treated in this unconscionable manner," said Unni.

Vaccines take top priority

Access to vaccination is essential to resolving these problems, according to the International Transport Workers' Federation - and not just access for seafarers. The political reality, ITF suggests, is that port states will limit seafarers' movements until the pandemic is curbed everywhere.

"Vaccinations are our passport to return to some degree of normality. Vaccinations are the way we restore our rights," said David W. Heindel, the chair of ITF Seafarers. "We know that the only way that governments will reliably and consistently restore seafarers' rights to crew change, shore leave and medical access, is for the virus to be gone. That is, practically eliminated in the community onshore and offshore."

For this reason, Heindel puts his number-one advocacy priority on a debate far outside of maritime circles: he thinks that the single most important policy change that a government can make is to support an intellectual property waiver for vaccine formulas. A vaccine patent waiver from the World Trade Organization would allow generic drugmakers to begin manufacturing vast quantities of effective jabs without paying for licensing, thereby making vaccination widely accessible.

"The world's governments can act immediately to reduce the suffering and illegal mistreatment of seafarers [by] actively supporting the TRIPS vaccine patent waiver being considered by . . . WTO," Heindel said.

A "fair future for seafarers"

This year, the International Maritime Organization is calling for recognition of seafarers' role in keeping trade moving and action to "ensure that the future being built is one that is fair to them."

"Unfortunately, there are still too many seafarers that have not been able to leave ships for an extended period beyond their contracts, and others have been unable to join ships in order to earn a living," said IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim in a video address.

"The crew change crisis is far from being resolved. We all must keep seafarers in our hearts and take action that will return seafaring to normal practices for crew changes."

An estimated 200,000 seafarers are still stranded on board past the end of their original contracts due to COVID-related travel restrictions, and IMO says that it continues to urge more IMO member states to designate seafarers as key workers, with priority access to travel and vaccination. Currently only 60 IMO member states have taken that step.