

Vaccines and crew change overshadow Day of the Seafarer

Seafarer groups call for vaccines and crew changes as IMO poll shows 73% of seafarers think the pandemic has changed the future of seafaring for the worse

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Shipping's usual tributes and calls to action on Day of the Seafarer were overshadowed by frustration that years of platitudes and calls for governments to act have done little to improve seafarers' lot



PLEAS TO GOVERNMENTS TO EASE TRAVEL CURBS FOR SEAFARERS HAVE MOSTLY GOT NOWHERE.

TRIBUTES were paid to mark the annual Day of the Seafarer amid continued industry frustration that pleas to governments to help relieve seafarers' plight have amounted to little.

Shipowner groups, companies, trade unions and maritime authorities thanked seafarers for their service to world trade as they lamented the continued struggles crews face in the second year of the pandemic.

Vaccines and the easing of travel curbs were chief among the industry's demands to governments, with the former seen as the only way to achieve the latter.

The International Maritime Organization called for “a fair future for seafarers” as a poll by the regulator showed 73% of seafarers agreed the pandemic has changed the future of seafaring for the worse.

“For a second year in a row we are marking this day as hundreds of thousands of seafarers continue to face restrictions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic,” it said.

“Access to repatriation, shore leave, and medical support all continue to be a challenge. Although there has been a significant reduction in the number of seafarers caught up in the crew change crisis, the numbers remain unacceptably high.”

International Maritime Employers’ Council chief executive Francesco Gargiulo said the number of overdue seafarers was climbing again.

He said it was not as high as last year’s peak of 400,000 was because of shipping companies and airlines adapting to the new normal, not because governments had made crew changes any easier.

“In shipping you no longer see the appeals to government anymore. We know they are not listening and we have learned to help ourselves and to work around the restrictions wherever we can,” said Mr Gargiulo.

He said Day of the Seafarer could do little except remind the public of the problem.

“All the Neptune Declarations in this world will not convince the Department of Health in Singapore to relax their draconian restrictions,” Mr Gargiulo said.

“I am afraid. And the only thing that could change this, is a global strike which is never going to happen as shipping cannot afford it — both financially and reputationally.”

Synergy Group chief executive Rajesh Unni, whose company manages almost 400 ships, said: “Another Day of the Seafarer is upon us and thus far our pleas have largely fallen on deaf ears.”

He recalled the case of the bulk carrier Vantage Wave (IMO: 9506514), which was left at sea for two months with dwindling food and water and the body of its dead captain stuck on board after China refused it entry. Similar cases have been reported elsewhere.

Capt Unni said Synergy had several cases where ships were made to wait for days to get emergency medical aid.

He said the mess of national vaccine rules had slowed their rollout and few ports allowed crew ashore to be jabbed. He said states should prioritise vaccinating foreign crews — point echoed by the German Shipowners’ Association.

“We need common standards for vaccines that are universally recognised with no delay,” Capt Unni said.

Mr Gargiulo hoped the trend of rich countries offering spare vaccines would continue to aid supply to poorer countries, adding there were relatively few seafarers in the world to vaccinate. “We are not talking about inoculating India here — there is only 1.4m of them,” he said.

“If governments really cared, this issue could go away in no time at all and the world supply chain would be safeguarded.”

The International Transport Workers' Federation despaired at “the yo-yoing policies of governments who refuse to acknowledge their role in stripping away the rights of seafarers that keeps them working on ships”.

“Being unable to stop working creates a situation of forced labour. What is being experienced right now by seafarers is tantamount to slavery. It’s that simple.”

The RMT union urged ratings to join trade unions to protect them from exploitation.

The IMO seafarer poll showed 42% of respondents felt they lacked enough training to respond to shipping’s future challenges and 39% were worried about autonomous shipping.

Guaranteed access to repatriation and crew change was the most important issue for 41% of seafarers polled, while 21% were most concerned about priority vaccinations and 16% safe enforcement of the Maritime Labour Convention.

Some 46% of respondents said working conditions was the area most in need of improvement, compared with 13% for training, 12% for safety on board and 30% said salaries was the top issue.

Ince, a law firm, meanwhile released a version of Rod Stewart’s 1975 hit “Sailing” to raise money for maritime charities.