

COVID-19 Shipping, Saluting the Unsung Maritime Heroes



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When I look back over the last seventeen years working for ICS I can never think of a time when things appeared to be more challenging for our industry and the seafarers onboard global vessels. Yes, we have had to deal with the repercussions of the Tsunami, Typhoon Haiyan, Zika virus, SARS and MERS, but COVID-19 has been the first truly globally impacting problem we have had to face which affects everyone. In the last six months, like Mark Dickinson of Nautilus this has dominated my thoughts, most of the work of the International Chamber of Shipping and most of my conversations with trade unionists, maritime organisations, UN agencies and governments.

ICS started to consider the impact of COVID-19 immediately after the Christmas leave period when the effects were first being experienced in China. During the early days of the virus it is true that some people thought it was just media sensationalism, with many not appreciating the warnings of the World Health Organization. However, the rapid spread of the virus, and subsequent global lockdowns, have resulted in us all recognising it will be difficult to return to it the 'old normal' in the foreseeable future. Mark Dickinson in the last

briefing questioned whether now is the time that the maritime industry can use to build a better future for seafarers. My answer is yes if we all pull together and work for the common aim of securing our futures.

I would agree with Mark that the worlds' seafarers were among the first to bear the brunt of the restrictions as some governments reacted to COVID-19.

Seafarers have faced difficulties in being able to access some of their fundamental rights under the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC) as governments have declared force majeure and made it impossible for shipowners to get these for their seafarers.

These difficulties, to name but a few have included:

- Replacement certification
- Access to Medical Care ashore for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related issues
- Difficulties for seafarers to be able to renew their personal prescriptions
- Ability to repatriate remains
- Renewal of passports and access to visas
- Flights to allow for repatriation and embarkation for seafarers
- Lack of available PPE for seafarers to be able to access
- Closure of Maritime Training Centres and difficulties for some cadets to be able to get sea time

ICS is very grateful to ISWAN for being able to continue to operate its 24/7 support line to support any seafarer at this difficult time.

I agree with Mark that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided some positive lessons which I hope will have a lasting impact. Seafarers must now and in the future be recognised as key workers in all countries. It is also vital that we continue to remind the

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world of our role as the fifth emergency service alongside police, the Armed Forces, medical services and fire services.

Shipowners are hoping for a speedy global recovery across all shipping sectors and we recognise the significant difficulties for those working in the cruise sector whilst their ships are laid up and hope also that ferry passenger numbers increase providing more demand for seafarers. We know how unsettling it is for everyone at times of job uncertainty and we are working hard to try to secure as many jobs as possible now and going forward.

Given the global nature of shipping we are aware that many seafarers have been financially hit by the pandemic and welcome the support of the various agencies who are working together to provide pastoral and limited support to seafarers at this time.

Social Partnership

ICS will continue to work with our social partners to do all we can to try to ensure that the shipping industry and its seafarers are treated responsibly during the pandemic and going forward and we welcome the collegiate nature of our discussions with all partners.

The future

Once we are free of this virus and return our 'new normal', I would agree that there must be space and time dedicated to finding better ways to operate the shipping industry. ICS will be happy to participate in a tripartite review where governments, shipowners and unions sit down and properly assess operations during with the pandemic.

ICS is concerned by the actions of some governments whether they are flag states, port states or labour supply countries and we will be asking them how they can ensure they honour their obligations under the MLC in the future.

Digital future

It is true that there has been an increase in using technology as a consequence of the coronavirus lockdown. Indeed we believe that had some of the recent technologies not have been in place the consequences of the pandemic would have been even worse. It is also true that this has forced companies to adopt new working practices and some of these that have worked will become the new norm.

The question now is will globalisation continue or will we return to more localisation. We will have to wait and see although I believe there will be a blend of both.

On behalf of all global shipowners we would like to salute you all and say thank you for all your efforts at this time. Long may our industry continue!

Natalie has been the Director of Employment Affairs for the International Shipping Federation and International Chamber of Shipping since March 2003. In her role she represents the industry on all Employment Affairs matters and coordinates Industry positions at the ILO, IMO, EC, WHO and other UN bodies as appropriate. She was actively involved in the development and implementation of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 and discussions on the ILO minimum wage, Crew Claims and Abandonment, Revision of STCW and concerns related to Piracy to name but a few areas. Natalie is also a trustee for Seafarers UK.

Natalie was a Board member for a number of years for both ISWAN's previous operations, namely ISAN and ICSW.

Natalie was previously a Trustee of Sailors' Society and Chair of their Welfare and Chaplaincy Committee.