

## What does COVID-19 mean for seafarers now and in the future?



*Mark Dickinson, General Secretary of Nautilus International*



When I look back over the various forewords I have written for Nautilus International's Telegraph magazine this year it comes as a surprise to see that in the March edition I made no mention of the words Covid-19 or Coronavirus. By the following month, and every month since, this has dominated my thoughts, most of the work of my union – Nautilus International – which represents maritime and shipping professionals, and most of my conversations with other trade unions, maritime organisations and government.

It's strange to look back at those early days of the virus. There was a period where many people thought it was just media sensationalism, a large number had no real idea what the World Health Organization did and 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' felt like the strapline from a post-apocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster.

Such was the rapid spread of the virus, and the subsequent lockdowns, it is sometimes hard to remember the 'old normal'. The big question now is whether there are lessons which can be learnt from this period and how

can the maritime industry use it to build a better future for seafarers?

### The blame game

Perhaps unsurprisingly to those of us who have worked in the industry for a long time, the world's seafarers were among the first to bear the brunt of the restrictions – and the blame – as governments began to react to the Coronavirus.

In those early days I was reminded of a similar bleak time for seafarers in the 1930s when they were vilified as the source of infection – a UK MP at the time suggested that seafarers be compelled to wear yellow armbands when ashore to warn others that they were potential carriers of venereal disease.

Thankfully no one went quite that far this time, but some governments did look to seafarers when seeking a fall guy – someone to criminally prosecute – when the pandemic reached their shores.

Criminalisation of seafarers will come as little surprise to those of us who dedicate our working lives to defending maritime professionals.

The Nautilus Federation, a global group of likeminded trade unions in the shipping industry, conducted a survey last year to assess the extent of criminalisation in the shipping industry. At the time over 90% of respondents said they feared being criminalised for an incident outside of their control. I can only assume this figure has increased even further due to reactions to the Coronavirus – especially in the cruise industry.

In response Nautilus has launched a new mobile app – the Nautilus Fair Treatment app. This 'friend in your pocket' gives our members instant, offline access to advice on what to do in the event of an incident or accident onboard if the authorities become involved. It

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has contact details for our 24/7 support line – operated by our partner ISWAN – and allows members to record notes and images about the incident, something which may provide a vital aide memoir when having to recount it later. Members can also send this report direct to Nautilus so that we can set wheels in motion to provide the best legal and welfare support should it become necessary.

Obviously, we hope that no member ever finds themselves in that situation. But if the Coronavirus has taught us all one thing, it is that how something which at first seemed so remote, can very quickly change all our lives.

### Key workers

The Covid-19 pandemic did provide some positive lessons which I hope may have a lasting impact. In an age where sea blindness appears to be an affliction suffered by politicians and the public alike, seafarers were recognised as key workers in most countries.

When infection rates first started rising, our TV screens were full of people rushing out to bulk-buy toilet rolls, hand sanitiser and tins of food. When the supermarkets inevitably couldn't cope with this surge, people started to think more carefully about how their shelves are stocked and where their goods actually come from. It was sad that the news agenda didn't really follow the supply chain much beyond the lorries and warehouses supplying those supermarkets, but there was a marked increase in the amount of publicity being given to ports, ships and seafarers.

Public displays of thanks to these keyworkers began springing up across the globe and hashtags including #TransportHeroes #NotAllHeroesWearCapes and #IMoveTheWorld became common place on social media. Long may this deserved recognition for those who move 90% of global trade continue.

However, the good news for seafarers didn't get much further than a brief round of applause. Those working in the cruise sector were among the first to be furloughed as ships were laid up around the world and then ferry passenger numbers all but disappeared leaving a much-reduced demand for workers. The offshore industry saw a brief flare in demand as foreign seafarers were no longer able to join ships, but this soon faded as the massive reduction in demand sent global oil prices into free fall.

Hundreds of jobs have already been lost and it is unclear how many will return as the world begins moving again. Nautilus International and our members will not take this lying down, our members' jobs are not for sale. We will be robust and resolute in our response and ensure that our members are supported professionally, and these redundancies resisted.

### Government support

Many seafarers have been financially hit by the pandemic and left without the support. A survey of UK members of Nautilus revealed that up to 11,000 seafarers were at risk of missing out on financial support offered to other workers because their employer does not operate UK PAYE for tax and national insurance purposes. As such their jobs could not be protected under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (JRS) nor would they receive grants to cover lost income under the self-employed scheme. Some faced a triple whammy because they couldn't work, they couldn't claim financial support, and by next April they will face a tax bill they were not expecting.

Seafarers who were able to work did not escape the negative implications of the virus either. Although they were possibly shielded from infection by the normal isolation of

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being away at sea, they were most affected when countries shut their borders.

Shipowners were swift to ask for an exemption from the limits provided for in the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC). The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the shipowners in the Joint Negotiating Group (JNG) within the International Bargaining Forum (IBF) agreed to two 30-day periods of crew contract extensions under the IBF Framework Agreement. However, when the increasing calls for governments to allow the repatriation of seafarers fell on deaf ears, and the shipowners asked for a third contract extension, the ITF refused. Instead, we proposed that governments should be given an additional 30 days to implement crew changes in accordance with the industry protocols circulated by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). If this fails to get governments to facilitate crew changes I believe the unfolding health and safety crisis will necessitate more drastic interventions by the ITF and its affiliated unions.

### The future?

Once we are free of this virus and return our 'new normal' there must be space and time dedicated to finding better ways to structure the shipping industry. I will be pushing for a tripartite review where governments, shipowners and unions sit down and properly assess how the shipping industry coped with the pandemic.

The ITF has been running a campaign against Flags of Convenience since the 1940s. This pandemic shows that whilst FOCs provide lots of convenience for shipowners which they view as customers they are a fat lot of use when a shipowner needs the support of government that actually has clout, resources and meaningful diplomatic outreach.

In the UK I will be pushing for an all-encompassing investigation into the consequences of using non-UK flags, non-UK resident seafarers and offshore employment practices that left the UK shipping industry and my members badly exposed. Other nations will have had similar experiences.

Just as healthcare workers became frustrated at being clapped every week whilst having their pay frozen and continuing shortfalls in testing and PPE, so too will maritime professionals not be happy with a one-off tokens of appreciation whilst suffering job losses, the erosion of terms and conditions and unable to work or get home to be with their loved ones.

### Digital future

An increase in using technology has been a consequence of the coronavirus lockdown that should not be overlooked, especially for those of us who are shore-based. At the Nautilus International General Meeting last year, Nautilus members agreed to several measures proposed in our 2030 Vision. One of these was for our communications to become 'digital first' and whilst we had been building the number of stories broken online rather than in our Telegraph magazine, the outbreak of Coronavirus accelerated this.

Our website became a central source of information, both for our members and the wider maritime industry. We were able to respond to developments much quicker than in the past and this became vital in the first weeks of the lockdown when information was changing and updating rapidly. The Nautilus communications team witnessed unprecedented traffic to our website, including a peak of 42,000 views for a story on seafarer certificates. We also witnessed a huge increase in followers and interactions across all our social media channels, prompting us to bring forward the launch of

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our new Instagram account (watch out for more social platforms soon).

Another of our 2030 Vision commitments was a substantial investment in new technology and this has helped us to move to remote working with relative ease. As well internal and external meetings moving to video conference, we also streamed the first virtual meeting of our Council with the help of our partners TAPIit. Whilst there will always be a benefit to meeting in person, there are clear lessons to be learnt about how much needs to be done face-to-face and how much can be achieved remotely. As well as the environmental impact of travelling for meetings which can sometimes only last a few hours, the benefits to the maritime sector are clear as so much must be agreed internationally.

When the pandemic finally comes to an end there will be other lessons to learn. Some will be easy to carry forward and some will require a great deal of consideration and persuasion. But Nautilus International and our friends in the maritime charities sector will continue to put maritime professionals and seafarers at the heart of those debates.

*Mark Dickinson has spent over 40 years in the maritime industry which began when he joined the British Merchant Navy as a Navigating Cadet in 1978 at the age of 16. In 1983, having secured his Officer of the Watch Certificate he came ashore to study and gained a Bachelor of Science with honours in Maritime Studies from the University of Wales. In 1992, he gained a Master's Degree with distinction in Industrial Relations from the London School of Economics.*

*Before joining Nautilus International in 2000 (then known as NUMAST), Mark worked for the International Transport Workers' Federation in two spells from 1987 to 1991 and 1992 to 2000 - from 1995 he was the ITF's*

*Assistant General Secretary with responsibility for maritime activities.*

*Mark was elected General Secretary of Nautilus International in May 2009 upon the merger of Nautilus UK (NUMAST) and Nautilus NL (FWZ) – creating the world's first trans-boundary trade union representing professionals in the British and Dutch maritime and inland transport industries. In 2011 Mark oversaw the creation of a Swiss branch. Mark was re-elected in April 2013 for a further four years.*

*Mark is also Director of the Nautilus Federation which brings together thirteen likeminded trade unions and associations dedicated to the mutual support of their members in the global shipping industry.*