

An urgent call from Shipmasters

The International Federation of Shipmasters' Associations (IFSMA) [see: www.ifsma.org] was established in 1974 to uphold International Standards of Professional Competence for Shipmasters and Seafarers.

IFSMA is a federation with a policy to ensure Safe Operational Practices, Preservation from Human Injury, Protection of the Marine Environment and Safety of Life and Property at Sea.

In 1975, IFSMA was granted Consultative Status as a non-governmental, apolitical organisation at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) which enables it to represent the views and protect the interests of the world's serving Shipmasters unfettered and unfiltered by others.

Unprecedented times

These are indeed unprecedented times and the maritime industry has been dealt a very serious strategic shock as nations around the world have closed their borders and stopped the free flow of traffic and people. We are in very rough seas and it is wreaking havoc across the industry with very serious consequences. IFSMA very much appreciates the significant work and leadership put in by the IMO, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Transport Federation (ITF), supported by others, as we all try to find ways to calm the seas and to return to some form of (new) normality for our seafarers.

In a joint open letter from the ICS and ITF on the 7 April 2020, entitled "Message To G20 Leaders and Ministers on Facilitating Essential Movement of Seafarers and Marine Personnel" they quoted key statements made by the G20 trade and investment ministers from their meeting on the 30th March highlighting that: they would ensure the smooth and continued operation of the logistics networks that serve as the backbone of global supply chains. They further stated they would explore ways for logistics networks via air, sea and land freight to remain open. Despite this, it appears that little has been done by the G20 and Governments to find ways to make this happen, despite the continued efforts of the Secretary General of the IMO, Mr Kitack Lim. Has the merchant industry and its seafarers been forgotten?

Seafarers as Key Workers

Today there are over 96,000 vessels and more than 1.65 million seafarers at sea around the world ensuring the movement of 95% of the world's trade and critical goods arrive where they are needed to supply our demanding populations. Most of these seafarers are serving at sea for between 8 and 12 months, working for 7 days and up to 91 hours each and every week.

They have been designated by the IMO, ILO, G20 and most Governments as "Key Workers" in this critical time and yet, because of the pandemic and the

worldwide restrictions on the movement of people, shipowners and management companies are facing significant immovable barriers, put in place by governments, in trying to changeover their crews leaving many seafarers significantly overrunning the original length of the terms of their contract of employment.

Indeed, increasing numbers of seafarers are several months over their contracted times and have been at sea for up to 15 months. Currently, it is estimated that there are in excess of 150,000 seafarers at sea, or in ports around the world that are in urgent need of being relieved by refreshed crew. This number will only increase week by week unless Governments act to allow crew changes to take place.

Contracted time onboard

Seafarers contracts vary in length across the industry, but the ILO's Maritime Labour Convention stipulates a minimum of 2.5 days holiday for each month served at sea which has to be taken within any one year. Many of our Seafarers are now suffering from fatigue, not only from the excessive length of time they have spent at sea, but also with the additional stress they are under from worrying about their family and relatives at home and the effect the pandemic is having on them – not all seafarers have access to the internet at sea and ports as pandemic regulations forbid seafarers accessing facilities ashore, even for acute medical emergency reasons. It must be remembered that the pandemic is not “Force Majeure”, shipmasters and their crews remain subject to normal contractual conditions and in accordance with the ILO's Maritime Labour Convention

Under international maritime regulations the shipowner/company shall ensure that their ships are manned with personnel that are medically fit and fit for duty. The shipmaster is responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of the crew on board and shall ensure that they are not exposed to conditions that could risk their health and safety. With a crew that is suffering from fatigue, ships are running a much higher level of risk in what is already a high risk profession. When errors are made on board ships it is often the shipmaster that is held responsible. Shipmasters have been forced into a situation which is not of their making and they feel pressurized to remain at sea for the safety of their crew. However, it is that very pressure and fatigue that is bearing down on them and that increases the risk of an accident occurring and significantly increases the risk of them being criminalized by the courts ashore and the loss of their livelihoods.

IMO recommendations

Following significant concerns from the maritime industry, the IMO issued Circular Letter No.4204/Add.14 of 5 May 2020 to all IMO Member States, United Nations and specialized agencies, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations in consultative status with IMO. In this, the Secretary-General refers to IMO Circular Letter No.4204/Add.6 of 27 March 2020 which contains, inter alia, recommendations to Member States about

measures to facilitate ship crew changes in seaports during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The IMO Secretary General also stated that he had received a *Recommended framework of protocols for ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic*, proposed by a broad cross section of global industry associations in consultative status with the Organization representing the maritime transportation sector, as follows: ICS, IAPH, BIMCO, IFSMA, INTERTANKO, P&I Clubs, CLIA, INTERCARGO, InterManager, IPTA, IMCA, INTERFERRY, FONASBA, ITF and WSC; and which also take account of input from the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

The Circular continued with “The Secretary-General supports these protocols and urges their implementation. Member States and international organizations are invited to make use of the annexed Framework and to disseminate it among relevant national authorities with responsibility, inter alia, for maritime issues, health, customs, immigration, border control, seaport and civil aviation authorities; and to liaise with relevant national authorities with respect to the use and implementation of this Framework, as appropriate”.

Concern at IFSMA

IFSMA is receiving an increased number of reports from its shipmasters' associations around the world whose shipmasters are concerned for the welfare and safety of their crews, and themselves, and the increased level of risk with which they are operating in an already high-risk environment. Seafarers are feeling let down and abandoned by their Governments.

Call to governments

IFSMA therefore very strongly urges all Governments to adopt the “*Recommended framework of protocols for ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic*” without any further delay to allow shipowners and management companies to change over their dangerously tired crews. Governments must act now in order to avoid personal injury and mental breakdown of seafarers and avoid the significantly increased risk of accidents and the consequential danger to life and damage to the environment.

For more information contact:

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