



International
Chamber of Shipping

Shaping the Future of Shipping

Shipping industry demands vaccine priority for seafarers, amidst renewed crew change struggles

19 January 2021: The International Chamber of Shipping is leading calls for governments to put seafarers and frontline maritime shore workers at the head of the vaccine queue and to designate seafarers as keyworkers, to avoid a repeat of the 2020 'crew change crisis'. ICS and [add national shipowners association] are demanding that governments, who are once again restricting travel as a reaction to new COVID-19 mutations, recognise the vital role seafarers play in the global supply chain.

The shipping industry knows that healthy, vaccinated seafarers are critical in keeping nations supplied with vital goods. Increasingly in 2021, this will include medical supplies such as syringes and the personal protective equipment (PPE) required as part of the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines. However, COVID-19 related restrictions have forced hundreds of thousands of workers to overrun their contracts, raising concerns over ship safety, crew fatigue and access to healthcare. Seafarers are currently being severely impacted by crew change crisis, with some approaching two years stuck at sea. With limited support from national governments, there is real concern that, under new restrictions, this number will rapidly increase rather than reduce.

The spread of new variants of COVID-19 in Brazil, South Africa and the UK is contributing to stricter crew change restrictions globally. The Philippines, for example, has expanded its temporary crew change ban to 35 countries, barring foreign seafarers from disembarking at Philippine ports. The UK is banning travellers from South America, and the USA has also toughened its entry requirements. This is part of a wider global retrenchment around ease of travel, which the shipping industry fears could result in hundreds of thousands of seafarers becoming the collateral damage of government inaction.

Representing more than 80% of global shipowners, and the interests of shipping in [insert country] respectively, ICS [and national shipowners association] demand that governments around the world take their duties to seafarers seriously and avoid a repeat of the mistakes of 2020. The International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s high-level committee of legal experts found last year that governments had breached seafarers' rights and failed to comply with several provisions of the Maritime Labour Convention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To guarantee the safety of its labour force, the shipping industry and bodies such as ICS are united in calling on the wider supply chain to take action and support seafarers immediately. The average ship has a mix of at least three nationalities on board, and sometimes as many as thirty. This fact makes the possibility of vaccinating by nationality, which is the current model of vaccine distribution, challenging. Priority access to vaccines for all seafarers, and clear 'vaccine passport' protocols in line with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations, is seen as vital to the maintenance of global trade.

Prior to the ILO's ruling in December 2020, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that calls for all countries around the world to designate seafarers as key workers. Pope Francis also voiced his concern for the 400,000 stranded seafarers, by urging governments to do all they can to end the crew change crisis.

While more than 40 countries have so far recognised seafarers as key workers, the majority of seafaring nations have not, creating growing demand from within industry for new solutions to the issue of vaccine distribution, before the humanitarian crisis facing seafarers gets any worse.

Guy Platten, Secretary General of the ICS, commented:

“The benefits of vaccinating those responsible for transporting the vaccine and PPE around the world should be obvious. Governments must class seafarers as ‘key workers’ and give them priority access to the vaccine, as the inability to rotate crews from their ships risks the passage of the critical medical materials needed for the global vaccination effort.

“If we want to maintain global trade, seafarers must not be put to the back of the vaccine queue. Governments will not be able to inject their citizens without the shipping industry or, most importantly, our seafarers.”

[National shipowners association quote]

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Notes to Editors:

About ICS

The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) is the principal international trade association for merchant shipowners and operators, representing all sectors and trades and over 80% of the world merchant fleet.