

The true cost of Covid - Waypoints article

We assess the impact which the coronavirus pandemic has had upon seafarers and shipping over the past year.

Almost a year after the first lockdown measures to inhibit the spread of coronavirus were imposed, we owe key workers an immense collective debt of gratitude. We often deem them to be heroes, however much they might wave away such labels.

Nevertheless, recognition is due when essential services are being carried out at considerable personal risk. It's a matter of urgent concern, therefore, that seafarers have been largely overlooked in this respect. Many countries have yet to award key worker status to maritime personnel – and, of course, this means far more than just the denial of an accolade.

Key workers can be allowed exemptions from local and international restrictions, without which the implementation of their vital duties would be effectively impossible. The fact that seafarers have yet to be granted key worker status by many nations, given that 80-90% of global trade (including essential items such as food, medicine and raw materials) is transported by sea, is both difficult to understand and worrying – but the problems go far deeper.

Stranded on board

Without key-worker designation, maritime personnel are subject to the same travel restrictions as any civilian. This means that the widespread closure of ports, borders and airports has prevented crews from leaving and stopped relief crews from boarding vessels. Many seafarers travel by air to and from embarkation and disembarkation points, but the sharp reduction in commercial flights has made this unviable.

This has been exacerbated by border closures, complicating passport and visa arrangements or prohibiting transit through certain territories altogether. Quarantine measures must also be factored into the equation.

The scale of the predicament is colossal; towards the end of September 2020, a reliable estimate suggested that around 400,000 seafarers were still stranded on board commercial ships, their contracts repeatedly extended well beyond the original expiry date of their six- to nine-month commitments, waiting interminably for a comparable number of relief crew members to take their place.

In many cases, this situation has persisted without even the prospect of shore leave to alleviate the isolation and often without a professional doctor on board to deal with medical issues where, for example, repeat prescriptions are required or where patients requiring more crucial attention have been forbidden from being treated on land. All of this severely tests the limits of SOLAS, SAR and UNCLOS Conventions regarding the obligation to assist seafarers in distress, irrespective of 'force majeure.'

Intervention required

Clearly, the intervention of respective governments is imperative before the situation becomes a full-scale humanitarian crisis, causing an irreparable hit to an already severely weakened global economy. The ongoing toll which this isolated existence, far from the support networks of home, family and friends, can place upon the mental health of seafarers isn't limited to personal impacts, but can also dangerously compromise operational safety. With some statistics attributing 96% of shipping incidents to human error, the anxiety and exhaustion being currently experienced by any number of stranded crew members takes on a troubling new significance.

The IMO's 10th anniversary Day Of The Seafarer campaign on June 25, 2020 strongly reinforced the message that maritime personnel need to be acknowledged as key workers on the front line of the coronavirus pandemic. The campaign urged governments to immediately institute safe and unhindered crew changeover protocols and repatriate fatigued mariners who had already spent long months at sea. This sentiment was bolstered by a concurrent statement from the UN Secretary- General, which was renewed on World Maritime Day, September 24, 2020. Actions are thankfully now being taken, but substantially more still needs to be done.

The good work of the IMO's Seafarer Crisis Action Team, operating in tandem with bodies including the International Chamber of Shipping, the International Labour Organisation and the International Group of P&I Clubs (of which West is one) is providing coordinated guidance and targeted support. For our part, West has committed to the long-term sponsorship of the 'Wellness At Sea', coaching programme devised by the Sailors' Society which aims to protect and improve the mental health of crew members, a scheme of particular value and relevance at the present time.

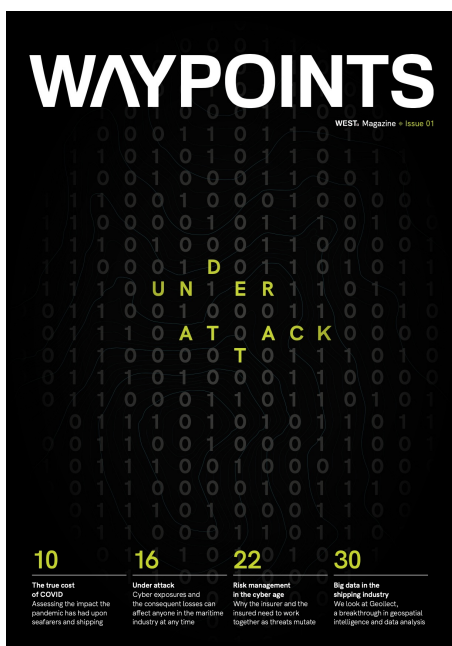
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Supply chains

The shipping industry as a whole has been hugely challenged by the pandemic, although, ironically, the fact that so many seafarers have continued working despite the expiry of their contracts has allowed ports to remain open and vital supply chains to be maintained. The potential nevertheless remains for significant disruption, however, with the possibility of factory closures, manufacturing backlogs and vessel delays brought about by quarantine demands.

From a P&I perspective, expenses incurred because of quarantine have generated claims, as have other factors relating to the pandemic such as repatriation expenses and fines for perceived MLC breaches, compensation for crew illness and damage to personal effects. West continues to provide detailed advice and support for Members on the potential legal issues raised by the pandemic, including duty of care towards crew; bill of lading considerations; off-hire events; frustration, exception and force majeure clauses; and implied indemnity.

There is also an interactive and publicly accessible digital dashboard, accessible in desktop and mobile formats, which sources live data from all 13 International Group Clubs, the IMO, the World Health Organization and other official sources to explain all current port- and country-specific COVID-19 restrictions.



This article was taken from Waypoints, Issue 01.

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