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**Powerful Unions, Vulnerable Workers: The representation of seafarers in the  
global labour market**

**Helen Sampson  
Seafarers International Research Centre  
Cardiff University**

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## **Abstract**

In the late twentieth century, the labour market for seafarers, which had always been international to some extent, became increasingly organised on a global basis. Shipping companies who had previously registered their vessels with their home State and were bound by national legislation with regard to wages and labour conditions began to have the option of registering their vessels with open registers (so called 'flags of convenience'). As a result of this related 'de-regulation' they went in search of cheap labour sources. Such labour market changes (particularly when combined with a move by many owners to contract the daily running of their vessels out to crew management companies) have resulted in the development of a plethora of crewing agents across the world, from Croatia to the Philippines and beyond.

Today, approximately 20% of the world's seafarers (employed in the deep-sea fleet) are Filipino, and over sixty per cent are employed aboard vessels with mixed nationality crews. Substantial numbers of seafarers from all over the world are engaged on temporary, fixed-term contracts, often at low wage rates. Seafarers' conditions at sea vary enormously and ILO conventions (e.g. ILO 147) designed to protect minimum living standards aboard ship are ratified by few countries and largely ignored by Port State Control inspectors worldwide.

The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) (and many of its national affiliated trade unions) is both feared and vilified by many shipowners because of the power it wields. The ITF has enjoyed considerable success in negotiating wages and enforcing wage agreements aboard a variety of vessels. Nevertheless, many seafarers continue to work and live aboard substandard ships. They enjoy increasingly rare opportunities to go ashore in the course of their contracts. They have little job security and work long hours, often seven days a week.

This paper will argue that this situation arises as a direct consequence of the globalisation of the seafarer labour market, and of the industry as a whole. It will outline the living and working conditions of multinational crews of seafarers and will describe the barriers to their effective collective action aboard ships. In doing so, the paper will draw on data collected in the course of five ethnographic voyages conducted by the author, over a period of 118 days at sea, as well as an extended period of fieldwork conducted in India with seafarers and their families.

## **Shipping sails towards globalisation**

In the early days of international sailing ships, crews were greatly in demand and seafarers for hire could be found in port towns and cities across the globe. A vessel owned in the UK might hire a predominantly British crew from her home port before setting off on a long voyage. However, by the time she reached her ultimate destination she would invariably need to replace ‘casualties’, the injured, the sick, and the dead. These replacements might be citizens of any nation and might, or might not, be willing recruits, the practice of ‘Shanghai-ing’ seafarers being widespread<sup>1</sup>. Thus multinational crews of seafarers were commonplace and port and voyage-based recruitment widespread.

As the industry matured, and nation states increasingly legislated for minimum standards and conditions of work, such practices died away and were replaced by more regularised and contractually based employment arrangements. Post-war merchant fleets were generally crewed by nationals and single nationality crews began to predominate. This change, incomplete as it was, was relatively short-lived however as in the 1970s and 80s shipping companies increasingly took advantage of the possibilities of registering vessels, not with domestic registers (flags), but with international open registers – so-called ‘flags of convenience’.

Open registers offered employers a range of cost advantages via reduced regulation and enforcement and were particularly attractive to owners in offering the option of recruiting relatively cheap labour on the global seafarer labour market (Bloor et al forthcoming, OECD 1996). Thus traditional maritime nations in northern Europe, such as Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom, found themselves incrementally being replaced as major suppliers of seafaring labour and found their domestic registers denuded of tonnage. In recent years some states have fought hard to resist such trends introducing tonnage taxes (e.g. UK) and second registers (e.g. Norway) to attract owners and protect the jobs of domestic seafarers. Nevertheless the composition of the seafarers labour market today reflects the ascendance of ‘new’ labour supply countries (some of which have long traditions of seafaring themselves but

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<sup>1</sup> This expression denotes the forced recruitment of seafarers combining the uses of alcohol, menaces, and physical violence

were isolated from the international labour market by cold war politics or economic underdevelopment) such as the Philippines, Ukraine, India, Poland, China, and Russia (see Table One).

Table One: Estimation of Active Seafarers by Selected Nationality based crew list data collected at selected major international ports<sup>2</sup>

Rank	Nationality	No.	% of total
1	Philippines	141,698	22.4
2	Ukraine	45,607	7.2
3	Russia	44,101	7.0
4	Indonesia	43,592	6.9
5	China	32,379	5.1
6	India	26,335	4.2
7	Turkey	23,810	3.8
8	Poland	20,057	3.2
9	Greece	15,952	2.5
10	Myanmar	12,519	2.0
	The rest	225,217	35.7
<i>World Total</i>		<i>631,267</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: Seafarers International Research Centre 2003<sup>3</sup>

Not only has the labour supply of seafarers become increasing internationalised and transnational, so too have ships, and shipping companies, themselves. A modern vessel may be owned in one part of the world, technically managed from another, crewed by a number of others, and registered in a different one again. In addition it operates across and between national borders and in its ‘lifetime’ might never once visit its country of registration. Thus the ethnic identity attached to ships as work and living spaces is somewhat indeterminate and has been described as representing something of a ‘hyperspace’ (Sampson 2003) similar to that identified as characterising transnational corporations, or locations such as chain stores, and airports (Kearney 1999).

### **The Problem to be considered**

The question then is how do the organisation of the labour market for seafarers, and the basic characteristics of the shipping industry impact upon the organisation of labour and the protection of vulnerable workers? This paper will address the question in a number

<sup>2</sup> This data excludes personnel aboard ferries, cruise and other passenger vessels

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Bin Wu for providing this data

of ways. Drawing on ethnographic data and secondary sources, it will begin by outlining the research methods used in collecting the data informing the paper and describing the organisation of life and work at sea. It will outline contemporary wages, conditions, and forms of seafarer exploitation, and will continue in updating the picture by describing the role of the ITF. In doing this the paper will illustrate some of the issues facing modern day seafarers in their representation and mobilisation. It will conclude that despite the fact that the ITF is unique amongst the global union federations in wielding considerable powers over employers, it nevertheless fails to successfully prevent the exploitation of large numbers of seafarers at the hands of employers, agents, and even national trade union affiliates.

### **Research Method**

The paper draws on materials gathered incidentally in the course of an ESRC/SIRC<sup>4</sup>-funded study of transnational seafarer communities<sup>5</sup> (Kahveci et al forthcoming). The three-year study incorporated ethnographic voyages aboard 14 vessels of different types and in different trades<sup>6</sup>. The author undertook five of these voyages and spent a total of 118 days at sea aboard crude oil and product tankers, reefers, and a bulk carrier. Research was also undertaken in the port cities of Rotterdam (Kahveci) and Hamburg (Sampson and Schroeder) and in seafarer communities in India (Sampson - Mumbai and Goa) and the Philippines (Kahveci - Cebu). A mixture of methods including observation, in depth interviews (including with employers), and focus groups were used in interrogating the research questions and this paper draws on the data collected in India, in Singapore and the UK, and in the course of the author's voyages.

### **Contextual Difficulties for Unionism**

To researchers, ships can be remote and dangerously isolated work sites (Sampson and Thomas 2003) but to many seafarers they become like prisons (Lane 1998, Sampson and Wu forthcoming). In many respects modern day conditions have returned seafarers to the sort of remote status associated with the early days of international sailing

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<sup>4</sup> ESRC- Economic and Social Research Council, SIRC- Seafarers International Research Centre

<sup>5</sup> (L214252036)

<sup>6</sup> The main research team of Kahveci, Lane and Sampson, was assisted by researchers undertaking single voyages for the project. The team was thus supported by Bloor, Bourne, Schroeder and Thomas.

vessels. In those days the sight of a ship at sea occasioned much excitement and was likely to provoke communication between the sets of people aboard each vessel, smiles, waves, shouts, laughter. Franklin writing of his 1726 voyage to Philadelphia describes how on meeting a vessel after a long period of time in isolation at sea he felt as if his:

heart fluttered in my breast with joy when I saw so many human countenances, and I could scarce refrain from the kind of laughter which proceeds from some degree of inward pleasure (in Raban ed. 1992: 100)

Today the sighting of a vessel is a common occurrence and occasions no such response but nevertheless modern seafarers, like their historical counterparts, feel confined on their vessels often unable to get ashore. The sense of being imprisoned is strong:

[It's] like a prison. You eat and then you work [...] Yes like a prison. You don't go ashore (Oiler: Interview with Sampson 2001)

Compounding this sense of isolation is the extent to which seafarers live in fluid communities as workers with people signing on and off their vessels on a fairly continuous basis. They may never see former colleagues or friends again, a fact sadly reflected in the oft quoted seafarer saying: 'friendship ends at the gangway'. Thus whilst seafarer solidarism is in many senses strong (Bloor et al forthcoming) and has been historically recognised and immortalised in adages emphasising togetherness it is also ephemeral. The phrase 'we're all in the same boat' clearly derives from the world of seafarers, and it conveys a positive basis for solidarity. However this is short lived (another voyage, another boat, another crew) and difficult to mobilise into sustained collective action. Rather it emerges at specific moments when the modern day equivalent of a mutiny might be provoked by the rash act of a senior officer<sup>7</sup>.

Work aboard ships can be monotonous and dangerous, and working environments are often variously, unpleasantly hot, cold, dirty, and noisy. In addition seafarers have to cope with the motion and vibration of a ship at sea and must learn to adapt to situations giving rise to fear and uncertainty. Such conditions would seem to have produced a work culture which rewards bravery, stoicism and uncomplaining endeavour (Bloor et al forthcoming) rather than resistance or 'bloody-mindedness'. It is an occupational culture which is recognised and valued by shore-based employers who see ex-seafarers

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<sup>7</sup> It is unusual but not extraordinary for senior officers, including Captains, to be violently attacked by crew members acting alone or in small groups

as attractive recruits precisely because of their attitude. As one manager put working in a container terminal put it:

The approach most seafarers have is very good because it is like being in a ship: when the ship is sinking you don't go for coffee break! That's the approach we need in business. (Interview with Sampson 2002)

Thus many seafarers, whilst feeling the effects of hard work, tedium, fear, motion, noise and so on, keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves neither discussing them aboard with their colleagues, nor ashore with friends and family (Sampson and Thomas forthcoming, Thomas et al 2003).

Perhaps this partly explains why in the course of the research conducted aboard cargo vessels in the period 1999-2001 I noticed an empty cabin marked 'union office' aboard one ship but was unable to track down any official, nor indeed unofficial, trade union representative on any vessel that I boarded. Suspicion rather than love of trade unions, or indeed trade unionism, was common and this often stemmed from seafarers direct experiences of trade union activities, or lack of them, and a strong sense in which unions could be 'bad news' for seafarers' career prospects.

In the post-war period seafarers' unions in Europe, Canada, the USA and Australia were relatively strong and there were moves towards more effective seafarer representation via national union action and more directly through ships' committees.

In a rare account of the kinds of representation which existed in the British merchant fleet for a short time in the fifties and sixties a seafarer named George Foulser pulls no punches in describing both his attitude to the UK seafarers' trade union of the day, 'The National Union of Seamen' (N.U.S.) and more democratic forms of direct representation aboard (which he favoured) in the form of ships' committees. He writes:

The general run of merchant seamen are dominated by a rat organisation with members of the capitalist-class as its so called officials, and voting-rules which make sure that no seamen will ever get official positions in the National Union of Seamen. Since I was born the N.U.S. has never had a single instance where the union officials have taken action against the shipowners. It was for the genuine seamen, the rank and file without a voice in their own trade union, to take action in order to retain the good name of British Seamen...The N.U.S. is often referred to as the National Union of Shipowners; and sometimes as the National Union of Scabs. It is because the N.U.S. follows the shipowners' aims that it fights tooth and nail against ships' committees for NUS members.



In Australia, new Zealand, Canada, the USA, Holland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Republic of Ireland, and in all the communist countries, merchant seamen have had legally recognized union representation aboard ship for years...Now that seamen have realised the value of their rank and file movement, I think that we shall obtain our freedom and our legal ships' committees-but no thanks to the British government whether Labour or Tory. And certainly no thanks...to the shipowners and their N.U.S. lapdogs. (Foulser 1961:64-5)

Foulser ends his account with an optimistic note in the face of what many, but not he himself, regarded as a defeat of the British seaman in a famous and relatively unusual strike in 1960. He suggests:

We had conducted a strike on a national scale to an extent never seen before in Britain...The seamen of Britain had put on a demonstration of solidarity which must rank alongside the dockers strike of 1889 as a landmark in the history of British trade-unionism. However striking was a new experience for most seamen...I think the Liverpool Committee made a wise decision when it called off the strike at the time it did...even though to many shore workers it looked as though we had been beaten. (Foulser 1961:191)

Nevertheless, this was not the last seafarers strike in the UK or abroad. In recent years strikes tend to have been concentrated in Europe (e.g. Greece, Norway, Finland) and they have generally impacted upon single employers, state employers, and/or largely domestic trade. The example of the 1992 strike amongst Norwegian seafarers reported in the extract below is illustrative:

Norwegian coastal traffic was at a standstill yesterday and Statoil's Mongstad activities were under threat as navigation officers and marine engineers staged a full scale strike. The action by more than 2000 officers and engineers followed a breakdown in negotiations between the Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers and Norwegian Mates' Association, and the employment organisation, the Confederation of Norwegian Coastal Shipping (NCS). The strike affected 400 vessels including car and passenger ferries, tug boats, coastal traders and high speed craft...(Fuhrmann 1992)

These strikes have been few in number, and short in duration. They rarely take place in the new labour supply countries now dominating the seafarers labour market and they may in time become largely consigned to history.

Seafarers, and particularly those from new labour supply countries and on 'per voyage' contracts, are acutely aware of the ease with which they can be blacklisted for 'troublemaking'. This practice remains widespread and whilst the ITF have made objections to such practices they have enjoyed little, if any, success in eliminating them.

For example, in 1998 a protest was led in the Philippines against blacklisting and the ITF strongly urged the administration to address the issues raised. The action was reported in the international trade paper *Lloydslist*:

The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) has asked the Philippines to amend rules penalising ocean-going seafarers who engage in industrial action overseas and to act against local manning agents blacklisting these seafarers...The ITF also noted that it would be taking action against 17 local manning companies [sic] which have filed legal cases against Filipino seafarers because of their association with the ITF. The ITF also wants the administration to outlaw the practice by certain manning agents of blacklisting seafarers who seek ITF help in preventing ill-treatment, bad conditions and collecting unpaid wages. The ITF said that an informal list and photographs of these workers are being circulated among manning agents for the purpose of preventing these workers from being re-hired. (Almazan in *Lloyds List.com* 1998)

However this and similar actions have done little to prevent anti-union Agencies from continuing to deter seafarers from associating with trade unions in general, and the ITF in particular. In 2000 the results of an international commission (ICONS) inquiry into ship safety were published and 'blacklisting' was again highlighted as a problem:

Blacklisting has long been the scourge of seafarers in the Philippines. A leading manning agent at the Commission's public meeting in Manila publicly confirmed the circulation of the Blacklists by fax among the manning agents. He provided several sheets of the latest lists to the Commission but did not identify the author of the Blacklists. (ICONS:50)

It is not unusual today for some seafarers to be required to pay a deposit before signing on to a vessel that is only returnable on completion of the voyage in a 'trouble-free' manner. Others are bound by written agreements not to contact the ITF or raise any dispute, connected with their employment, with a trade union or outside body.

### **Wages, conditions, and forms of exploitation**

The life of seafarers working aboard internationally trading cargo vessels is directly linked to their contracts which are in turn wholly dependent upon nationality and rank. At its best a job at sea will entail working and being ashore for equal lengths of time,

two months on and two months off, and four months on and four months are typical patterns for officers from North Europe. At its worst the job can involve working for periods of up to two years, a situation that is not uncommon for seafarers, from economies like that of the Philippines where there are few jobs paying reasonable wages. Wages are difficult to precisely gauge as companies can be reticent about producing detailed figures often engaging in the practice of double bookkeeping<sup>8</sup>. Seafarers themselves may be involved in cover-ups over true wage levels as a result of employer threats and may be afraid to discuss their wages at all with outsiders. However it would appear that Wages (even aboard vessels with ITF blue certificates<sup>9</sup>) may be very low, falling below ILO minimum standards and ITF benchmarked rates. In countries such as the Philippines and China however such rates of pay are higher than local rates for shore-based jobs. This disjuncture between ‘global opportunities’ and national levels of income is central to understanding seafarer rates of pay and conditions of work.

It is not uncommon for seafarers of the same rank but from different countries to be working aboard sister ships for different rates of pay. Similarly aboard a single vessel an officer from one part of the world, for example The Philippines, might receive lower wages than a colleague of lesser rank from another part (for example, Sweden).

As with wages job security is influenced by nationality and rank. Ratings<sup>10</sup> often drawn from areas such as the Philippines, China, and Indonesia (see Table Two), are almost universally employed on a contract by contract basis, whilst officers may have more secure employment conditions. For example, NUMAST, the UK officers’ union estimates that half of their members are on permanent employment contracts and half work on a voyage by voyage basis<sup>11</sup>. By contrast a well known tanker operator reported, in the course of the research, that their attempts to employ Filipino seafarers on a

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<sup>8</sup> Double bookkeeping is reported as widespread aboard vessels wishing to avoid ITF sanctions but similarly avoiding paying ITF rates

<sup>9</sup> Issued to companies paying into the ITF welfare fund and holding ITF approved collective bargaining agreements

<sup>10</sup> Non-officer ranks

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sampson 2002

permanent basis were continually thwarted by various agencies of the Philippine State making it impossible for them to implement their proposals<sup>12</sup>.

Table Two: Estimation of numbers of officers and ratings from top thirty labour supply countries based crew list data collected at selected major international ports

Rank order	Nationality	Senior Officers <sup>13</sup>	Junior Officers	Ratings
1	Philippines	19,800	40,636	81,263
2	Ukraine	19,857	16,038	9,712
3	Russia	21,527	15,476	7,098
4	Indonesia	10,239	10,297	23,056
5	China	7,150	9,606	15,623
6	India	7,365	9,799	9,171
7	Turkey	10,765	6,226	6,818
8	Poland	10,267	5,531	4,259
9	Greece	9,551	4,326	2,075
10	Myanmar	1,633	3,913	6,973
11	Romania	4,974	4,453	2,029
12	Bulgaria	3,529	3,465	3,861
13	Latvia	3,292	3,101	2,753
14	Croatia	4,169	2,452	1,371
15	South Korea	3,627	2,239	1,563
16	Malaysia	1,024	1,472	3,346
17	Netherlands	3,746	1,337	208
18	Germany	4,185	442	258
19	Italy	2,147	1,399	1,329
20	Norway	3,537	1,020	206
21	UK	3,027	1,472	66
22	Denmark	2,489	1,201	101
23	USA	1,317	1,163	991
24	Pakistan	1,382	1,145	656
25	Spain	1,535	858	700
26	Japan	1,364	373	132
27	Sri Lanka	267	405	800
28	Honduras	141	54	544
29	Canada	341	360	38
30	Finland	421	168	32

Source: Seafarers International Research Centre

Thus length of voyage, wage levels, and job security are all dependent on the specific employer for whom a seafarer works, and additionally on the seafarer's personal characteristics and the rank in which s/he is employed. In poor regions of the world

<sup>12</sup> This may be a result of the income generated in the processing of seafarer contracts by various agencies in the Philippines, income that would be diminished were seafarers not in the position of having to agree a new contract every voyage

<sup>13</sup> Senior officers are generally counted as the 'top four' i.e. the Captain, Chief Mate, Chief Engineer, and First Engineer.

contracts, even in unskilled grades of work, are nevertheless sufficiently attractive to result in seafarers paying to get a job aboard a ship<sup>14</sup> or, as is common practice in the Philippines, working for little or no wages in the offices of crewing agents on the promise of being offered a job aboard at some future point<sup>15</sup>. The latter practice bears less risk for seafarers as having gone through such an 'induction' period with a reputable crewing agent (it is not necessarily poor companies that engage in such practices) they face a reasonable prospect of remaining aboard for at least one full voyage and earning relatively high wages for that period. The experience of some seafarers interviewed in India, who were paying for jobs, was significantly worse however. Here there were examples of seafarers who had paid to join a ship only to have it sold from under their feet after a short period aboard during which time they had not earned sufficient money to pay off the debt they had incurred to get their job. These practices result in spiralling debt problems for seafarers who became trapped as a consequence of the large sums of money involved. To pay off a single debt whilst employed ashore was generally quite impossible for an unskilled seafarer. For them, their only escape from debt lies in getting another job aboard a ship. As such they are quite prepared to take on further debt to facilitate this, making them more and more vulnerable to the unscrupulous practices of powerful individuals. The problem is so extensive that it has even come to the attention of the international media as this report in *Lloyds List* demonstrates:

The National Union of Seafarers of India has alleged that 30% of Indian seafarers suffer at the hands of recruitment agents, who represent certain foreign-flag owners. 'After signing articles of agreement, gullible seamen are forced to contribute a portion of their wages to these agents,' said Leo Barnes, Nusi's general secretary. 'Unscrupulous agents recruit Indian seamen desperate for jobs which offer low wages and poor service conditions...there are thousands of qualified seamen looking for jobs, so bogus agents demand bribes and offer jobs to those who can give them the highest kickbacks' said Mr Barnes. (Lloyds List.com 2000)

While seafarers universally regard 'middlemen' as exploitative and corrupt they have similar feelings about their national unions and often with seemingly good reason. In India seafarers complained, and employers confirmed, that one union had adopted a

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<sup>14</sup> Amounts in the region of US\$1,000 were reportedly paid to 'middlemen' in India. In China seafarers were sometimes paying two separate agencies a proportion of their wages for being 'placed' aboard a foreign flagged vessel (Wu forthcoming)

<sup>15</sup> This period of waiting can quite commonly last for as long as two years

practice whereby employers agreed not to employ seafarers unless they could produce a 'certificate of no objection' from the union. This certificate was said by seafarers to be issued on payment of a 'donation' to a foundation set up by the President of the union, under his name, of amounts up to and including US\$1,000. Some employers reported refusing to support this process as they had become aware of the full implications of the issue of 'no objection certificates'. However not all were confident enough to resist the pressure of the union, some were unconcerned for the welfare of seafarers they employed and others were simply ignorant of what was going on. Such exploitation of members by trade unions and related corrupt practices were reported in a variety of different nations. Most commonly unions would insist on seafarers aboard vessels flagged by their home state becoming members of the local union. Yet the seafarers aboard these vessels might be from a widespread geographic area and might never set foot on the soil of the land in which their union was domiciled. They received no benefit from their membership thus missing out on privileges such as the use of health facilities, or training provision. In Singapore employers complained about this practice whilst in Florida it came to light that union dues were being docked from seafarers wage packets without them even being aware of it and certainly without their being aware of whatever benefits were attached to such 'membership'. Thus for a variety of reasons national seafarer unions are often distrusted by their 'members' and their wider constituency. The ITF however has a slightly different reputation.

### **The ITF and new forms of unionism**

The ITF is one of only ten Global Union Federations (GUFs) in the world (Fairbrother and Hammer forthcoming). It claims a membership of 621 transport trade unions in 137 countries representing approximately five million transport workers approximately 20% of which are seafarers. The union is different to other Global Union Federations in directly influencing, and in recent times negotiating, international minimum wage rates for seafarers. Traditionally the ITF had impacted on wage levels by unilaterally, and employers would claim 'arbitrarily', announcing them and using force, largely via the power of dockers, to enforce them. This led to a widespread and publicly expressed employer loathing and hatred of the ITF on what must be a fairly unprecedented scale in a modern context. At shipping conferences employers have been observed bitterly and verbosely complaining from the 'floor' at the mere presence of ITF representation on

the platform. Efforts to be 'modern' and to find any 'third way' entailing social partnerships, support for stakeholders, etc. seem entirely absent in this context although recently employers have begun to directly negotiate with the ITF in setting benchmark wages through an organisation known as IMEC (International Maritime Employers Committee). This has presented its own problems for employers as ship operators themselves argue about the right of IMEC to represent them in such negotiations. It has also presented problems to the ITF who have been faced with threats by affiliates, who are under pressure to keep jobs for their own members, to negotiate their own separate deals with national shipowner associations as the following newspaper report documents:

Top shipping bosses are to seek major concessions from the International Transport Workers' Federation on both the pay and the welfare levy fronts, writes David Osler. The move comes at a time when the union's secretariat's negotiating hand has been weakened by dissident Japanese and Filipino affiliates who have threatened to strike a breakaway deal with the Japanese and Norwegian shipowners' association. (Lloydslist.com 2002)

In its other activities the ITF has come closer to emulating the day to day business of its fellow GUFs who primarily act as campaigning bodies operating on a global scale. It has run a sustained campaign against Flags of Convenience, it has campaigned against substandard ships and conditions for seafarers using its raft of inspectors employed in different world regions to identify and effectively halt the operations of such vessels, and it has actively intervened in crisis situations when seafarers have been left stranded aboard vessels 'abandoned' by their operators and owners. The following example of this widespread occurrence is relatively typical:

A seafarer aboard an abandoned chemical tanker has gone on hunger strike, after the Falklands Islands government effectively condemned the crew to remain on board the stricken vessel indefinitely...the owners have washed their hands of the 9,970 dwt *Queen of Vevey*...ChemOil International promised the crew full wages and repatriation. Instead she was abandoned, leaving the seafarers dependent on the local seamen's mission. (Lloydslist.com 1999)

The ITF also has a large welfare fund for seafarers, which is funded directly by employer levies (another source of employer resentment towards the organisation). This fund is organised as a separate charitable trust the monies from which are directed towards schemes benefiting seafarers across the world including for example: seafarer transportation schemes; the funding of seafarer centres; the funding of information

hotlines and websites and of cheap and accessible methods of communication for seafarers.

Aboard ships included in the research the ITF was contradictorily reported by seafarers as being both a dangerous and a reassuring presence. Seafarers are wary of being seen to be ITF supporters but they nevertheless turn to ITF inspectors when things are difficult on board, when they haven't been paid due wages, and when they are abandoned in distant ports without, food, water, power, and resources. Employers have at best a wary and suspicious relationship with the ITF, although many ex-seafarers engaged in shore side operations tend to retain some sympathy for its objectives - if wishing that it would pursue them elsewhere, the 'not in my backyard syndrome'!

### **Conclusions: explaining the contradictions of power and vulnerability**

The ITF is the most powerful of all the GUFs in relation to its direct impact upon the wages of seafarers of all nationalities working aboard internationally trading cargo vessels. It directly engages in collective bargaining with representatives of international shipping companies and has the means at its disposal to enforce such agreements. Uniquely it also has access to ships as workplaces via its network of inspectors based in ports across the globe. Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, seafarers continue to be amongst the most exploited workers in the world. They often live in appalling accommodation on board dangerous and badly maintained vessels. They may be fed substandard, pest infested, food, of poor nutritional value (Lane et al in press). Seafarers may be expected to work long hours and suffer considerable fatigue as a consequence. They are generally isolated, have few opportunities to go ashore between voyages and have access to poor communications with their families and friends. Life at sea no longer lives up to the romantic image associated with international sailors and indeed it may rarely have done so. In addition seafarers may find themselves at sea and unpaid as employers delay wage settlement for months at a time leaving their families without money and vulnerable to debt accumulation. Worse still seafarers may be abandoned by owners and managers in far flung ports and without resources to live, eat, get warm/cool etc., or to travel home. They have very little access to medical treatment aboard and as a consequence suffer greater health risks than their shore-based counterparts. Suicide rates amongst seafarers are reported to be higher than average (Roberts) and they may



well be at greater risk of developing addictive behaviours induced by the isolation and monotony of their working environment (Sampson and Thomas forthcoming).

This seems discrepant with the strength of the ITF and requires some explanation. In general explaining seafarers' vulnerability in the face of the influence of their international union (GUF) involves understanding the reluctance of seafarers to actively flex their industrial muscle either directly or indirectly (via mobilisation of dock workers). There are various factors at play here: The ability of manning agents, and ship owners to 'blacklist' 'troublemakers'; consciousness on the part of national labour forces of their vulnerability on the international labour market (this is of course not exclusive to seafarers, but there is a tremendous ease with which employers can switch labour sources as their plant is mobile and seafarers are required to travel to it rather than it travelling to them); a workplace culture based upon stoicism; and a distrust of national trade unions. This latter factor is a strong one, and the ITF's image is often tarnished by the actions of its affiliates. In many cases it is not credible to imagine that the ITF is unaware of the corrupt and reprehensible behaviours of some affiliates but since they rely upon them for finance and legitimacy it is likely that they feel constrained in their ability to address the problems that seafarers and employers highlight. However, their inaction may be perceived by seafarers as a lack of concern or worse as complicity thus impacting upon their ability to mobilise seafarers in defence of their own conditions of work.

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