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Reviewing seafarers' welfare at sea and ashore



Seafarers paint a bleak picture of their welfare facilities, but there are some positive developments, says **Erol Kahveci** of the Seafarers' International Research Centre

Concern about reduced access to shore-based welfare facilities by seafarers has prompted the ITF Seafarers' Trust to fund a major research project by the Seafarers' International Research Centre at Cardiff University.

The aim is to find out the current state of welfare provisions ashore, identify needs and to make informed policy decisions to improve the situation. While the initial findings paint a bleak picture, there are some positive developments on the horizon which the research's findings will help to direct.

Preliminary analysis of questionnaires returned by some 4,000 seafarers revealed that 64 per cent of respondents said they had not had any shore leave during the previous eight weeks. The 32 per cent who had had shore leave during the same period said that it lasted on average for around two hours, and the majority were not able to go further than the nearest phone box.

The main reasons given for not having shore-leave were workload when the ship was in port, fast turnarounds, lack of information about the ports where their ships called, lack of transport, and restrictions by the port authorities which were related to the ISPS code.

The most important port-based welfare services were thought to be transport to shops/town and seafarers' centres, access to international phones and cheap phone cards.

When they were asked about the availability of these services in the ports that they had visited during their current contracts, the overwhelming majority of the seafarers said that they were not adequately provided. However, seafarers mainly calling in ports in Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australia found the port-based welfare services were better than in other world regions.

In comparison with another major survey carried out over ten years ago in 1996 by the research agency MORI, the opinions of seafarers in relation to the most important port-based welfare services have changed.

According to the MORI survey in 1996, the most important port-based welfare services listed by more than 50 per cent of the seafarers questioned were international telephones, postal services, port-based medical clinics, transport to and from ships, money exchange, video/book exchange, social meeting places, sport facilities and reading rooms/libraries.

However, today, apart from international telephones and transport, only a handful of seafarers regarded these services as being important. These shifts reflect the changes in the maritime industry and basic priorities of seafarers with a limited time in port. This change can also be clearly seen when comparing SIRC and MORI surveys. According to 1996 MORI survey, 57 per cent of seafarers were satisfied with their shore leave. Today, on

the contrary, 64 per cent of the seafarers were not able to have shore leave for a considerable length of time.

Many seafarers described their lives at sea as "being in prison", "isolated", "lonely" and a "sacrifice" to provide better living conditions and opportunities for their loved ones. In this context, compared with port-based facilities, welfare services provided aboard their vessels did little to improve the situation.

The substantial majority of the seafarers said that it was important for them to see a ship visitor from a shore-based seafarer welfare organisation. However, seven out of 10 respondents said that they had not seen a ship visitor aboard their vessels during their current contracts. However, seafarers working on short sea trade and trading in the developed world regions such as Western Europe and North America were more likely to see ship visitors.

As the respondents worked for over 100 different shipping and ship management companies, their onboard welfare provisions varied substantially. However, only one company within the respondents group provided a free email account for each seafarer and only one shipping company provided free transport on request to their seafarers when their ships were in port. This is despite the fact, as the study has shown, transport and communication are seen as most important services by seafarers.

Eight out of ten seafarers of all ranks said that they had no access to onboard email facilities although, overall, officers were more likely to have access than ratings.

However, those seafarers who



said they had access to email facilities onboard expressed dissatisfaction with the limited number and length of messages they could send and also the lack of privacy. Some seafarers said that they not only had to pay for the messages they sent from their ships, but also for incoming emails too. Therefore, expensive communication facilities such as satellite and mobile phones were the only options for communication with their families and friends ashore when they were at sea. Only one out of 10 seafarers mentioned writing letters. Although this is the cheapest option available, many said that the limited time they had, and the length of time it took for letters to be sent and received, made letter writing less attractive.

Again, provision of other facilities onboard vessels, such as



FREE transport from their ships, as provided by the ecumenically run seafarers' centre in Felixstowe, UK, and telephones available 24 hours a day, are the highest priorities for seafarers when they are in port. Photos: Graeme Cookson and Andrew Payne

sports and recreational facilities, varied considerably according to the different companies our respondents worked for. One of the best reported company policies on welfare provisions included a monthly provision of a \$150 welfare fund per ship. From this, seafarers would decide what to buy in the way of DVDs, sports equipments, musical instruments etc. However, the worst cases varied from very limited provision to "pay for it yourself" where seafarers contributed shipboard welfare funds either from their overtime pay or extra earning onboard from such activities as cargo handling or cleaning of cargo holds.

While many of these findings are very negative, the fact that the survey has been carried out at all will, it is hoped, point the way to improvements.

In addition, there are growing concerns about seafarers' welfare among shipping and ship management companies. For example, the president of the International Ship Managers Association recently stated in relation to crew shortages that too many companies took a short-term approach to seafarers, viewing them simply as a cost to be borne. "Much more emphasis needs to be placed on the welfare of seafarers and their families," he said.

Another positive development is that the ITF and shipowners have recently formed the International Bargaining Forum (IBF) special agreement for seafarers working aboard flag of convenience vessels. The agreement sets out the standard terms and conditions applicable to seafarers serving on any ship owned or operated by a company which is a member of the

Joint Negotiating Group (JNG).

The new IBF special agreement requires that 5 per cent of the contributions made by IBF members to its Seafarers' International Welfare Assistance and Protection Fund will be paid into a special account jointly administered by the ITF and the JNG. This fund will be used exclusively for seafarers employed on the ships covered by the IBF agreement to provide benefits such as onboard welfare facilities, crew communications and assistance for them or their families. Currently there are about 2,500 vessels covered by the IBF special agreement.

Maritime welfare organisations, in particular maritime ministries, are adjusting their work to take account of changing conditions. For example, The Mission to Seafarers is about to embark on a major study to enable it to improve its welfare services for all seafarers.

Finally, the new ILO Consolidated Maritime Labour convention sets mandatory minimum standards for seafarers' onboard recreational facilities and access to shore-based welfare facilities. When ratified, this should have global implications.

The long-term impact of all these initiatives on seafarers' welfare still remains to be seen. Meanwhile, seafarers who responded to the questionnaire strongly believed that free transport services to shore-based welfare facilities, ship visits by welfare workers, information about the ports where they call, a balance between the application of the ISPS code and their welfare needs, and access to onboard e-mail facilities would improve their welfare at sea and ashore immensely.