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Sensemaking, Inequity and Agency in a Precarious Transnational Workspace: The Case of International Seafarers

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ABSTRACT

International seafarers are highly trained and certificated workers but are subject to precaritising working conditions. This affects how they understand and respond to perceived inequities in relation to terms and conditions of employment. Drawing on qualitative interview data, this article examines how this group of workers make sense, rationalise and cope with precarious working conditions. In so doing, it: (i) highlights a range of inequities in seafarer terms and conditions of employment; (ii) examines how seafarers make sense of, and respond to, these inequities within a precaritising work context; and (iii) argues that seafarers adopt a pragmatic context-sensitive approach that allows them to flex between different modes of understanding (i.e., framings) in a manner that is individualised, rational and preserves their sense of agency.

1 | Introduction

Work for many is precarious; with non-standard employment relations, reductions in workplace protections and workforce fragmentation workers are subject to structures that undermine both their security and terms and conditions of employment (Alberti et al. 2018; Standing 1999, 2011; Vosko 2010; Felstead et al. 2020). There is, however, limited investigation of how workers make sense of such contexts and, how their perceptions both legitimise and contest their experiences in a manner that reflects their sense of self and their ability to exercise agency (Manolchev 2020; Sidoti 2015; Trappmann et al. 2024).

This paper addresses this gap through a case study of the experiences of international seafarers, a group of skilled, professional workers central to global commerce but who are largely invisible, operating out of view of those onshore who benefit from their work and working under conditions of precarity (Bonacich and Wilson 2011; Walters and Bailey 2013; Sampson 2024). Much previous work into precarity has focused on workers that are low skilled, and often at the bottom of global value chains (e.g., factory workers and delivery drivers). By contrast, international seafarers are relatively well-paid, skilled workers with clearly defined career structures. Moreover, rather than nationally based, this group of workers are embedded within a complex transnational space. Hence, this article makes visible this important group of international workers, the type of inequities experienced in relation to their employment, and how they make sense of and respond to precaritising work conditions.

Drawing on qualitative interviews, our analysis provides insight into seafarers' experiences and understandings of work. Central to our account is the argument that seafarers orientate

themselves to inequities in their work situation in a pragmatic manner (i.e., they flex between different ways of framing their experiences) informed by their perceptions of the precaritising arrangements that confront them, their underpinning aspirations, and conceptions of work in the wider context of their lives.

In the next section, we introduce the literature on precarity before outlining the institutional and organisational context of seafaring work. We then discuss the methodological approach adopted before introducing our findings.

2 | Work, Precarity and Seafaring

Driven by neoliberal ideology and processes of globalisation leading to outsourcing, offshoring, deregulation and the degradation of the conditions for collective organising, work for many is precarious. Precarious work is characterised by objective features of the employment relationship, that is, employment that is poorly compensated, temporary, part-time, contract-based or through employment agencies (Alberti et al. 2018; Alon 2023; Kalleberg 2009). But also, the idea of 'bad' jobs; understood as poor terms and conditions of employment and lack of supportive arrangements, such that risk is transferred from employers to workers (Campbell and Price 2016; Felstead et al. 2020).

Precaritising conditions fragment the workforce, isolate workers and undermine their capacity for active resistance. This has posed the challenge of how to promote collective action and organise such workers to improve conditions (Anner 2015; Greer and Umney 2022). Consequently, it is crucial to understand how workers experience and make sense of their working conditions (Kalleberg 2011; Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Trappmann et al. 2024). Of importance here is the link between the structural features of work and the narrative of selfhood that informs how individuals act. Within the research literature, four distinct frames can be identified, which workers utilise to make sense of precarity (Trappmann et al. 2024). We discuss these in turn.

The first frame claims that the promotion and normalisation of neoliberalism entails that workers are not only situated in exploitive structural arrangements, but their sense of self can be colonised by a neoliberal conception of the good worker, leading to a form of self-disciplining and complicity in their own exploitation (Bloom 2017; Manolchev 2020). This is a self that adopts an individualised sense of responsibility for their lives, families and situation (Whyte 2019). As such, precaritising conditions become perceived as a space of possibility (Lorey 2006; Peticca-Harris et al. 2020) for the agential self to manage themselves as an enterprise within the market (Gershon 2011).

A second frame, by contrast, represents a resigned acceptance of extant conditions due to repeated exposure to precaritising working conditions and emphasises the structural arrangements that disempower workers (Trappmann et al. 2024). While such an attitude may limit the possibility of formal or collective resistance perceived to be a form of defeatism (Anner 2015; Greer and Umney 2022), such workers may nonetheless engage in micro forms of resistance subject to opportunity and context (Harris and Ogbonna 2024).

A third frame places the experience of precarity within the narrative of a life-course; where precarious work is tolerated as temporary, a phase to be passed through, possibly as a strategic step to gain necessary skills. Here tolerance is instrumental; in that the 'now' enables a better future. Often adopted by young workers and migrants, this frame views precarious work as normal, the only option to unemployment, and a career stage to pass through (Cook et al. 2011; Kesisoglou et al. 2016; Sidoti 2015).

The fourth frame accepts precarious work as a way to assert autonomy by both escaping the alienating quality of the restrictive demands of the rhythm of organisational life and as a trade-off that has to be made to pursue work that is perceived as meaningful (Trappmann et al. 2024).

At a conceptual level, each frame indicates a particular relation between self, agency and the prevailing structural conditions of work. The first frame depicts an embracing of precarity; the individual self as colonised by neoliberal ideology. For such individuals, what might be seen as a lack of security is reframed as flexibility and opportunity, a chance to deploy one's agency. By contrast, in the second frame, the worker perceives themselves as located within determining structures in a manner that suggests a subjugated self, they recognise the constraining conditions but feel unable to resist them. By contrast Frames 3 and 4 locate acceptance within a broader conception of the self and life projects; as such they offer conceptual space for individuals to reject or at least express a distance from a neoliberal viewpoint in a way that preserves agency. For ease of reference, we refer to the four frames as follows: (1) neoliberal, (2) defeatist, (3) instrumental, (4) escapist.

In this paper, we show how seafarers draw on Frames 1–3 to make sense of their experience of inequity in their terms and conditions of employment (Frame 4 was not present in our data). Before doing so, we outline the context of contemporary seafaring.

2.1 | The Institutional (Macro) Context of Seafaring

International merchant shipping is central to global supply chains and capitalism's need to accelerate the circulation of commodities (Campling and Colás 2023; Miszczyński and Zanoni 2025). In total, 90% of the world's goods, by volume, are transported by ship. Consequently, the 1.9 million international seafarers operating them are central to international commerce (Stopford 2009; ICS 2024). In practice, merchant seafaring is a highly structured and skilled occupation but also precarious and dangerous (Sampson et al. 2019; Walters and Bailey 2013).

Shipping is highly competitive with ship operators competing to secure cargoes amidst volatile and fluctuating markets where economic power largely lies with the charterers, that is, those renting control of the ship or space onboard. As such,

shipowners seek to minimise variable costs, especially crew costs (Campling and Colás 2021; Stopford 2009; Walters and Bailey 2013). A key strategy employed across the sector is 'offshoring' ships via flagging out, that is, registering them under the jurisdiction of a Flag of Convenience (FOC) which offers regimes with low tax, lower regulatory standards, limited oversight and no restrictions on crew nationality (Alderton and Winchester 2002; DeSombre 2006).

The latter has led to the emergence of a global labour market for seafarers, underpinned by a common international certification regime. Rather than direct employment by shipowners, seafarers are mainly employed through networks of nationally based crewing agencies, primarily in low-income countries. These recruit and promote seafarers to international ship operators based on cost, placing seafarers of different nationalities in competition with each other (Kahveci and Nichols 2006). The role of trade unions in these countries is limited primarily to service provision.

Typically, living and working within a foreign jurisdiction (i.e., that of the nationality of the ship, the flag state), seafarers can be viewed as migrant workers (Bailey and Winchester 2018; Kelly and Ducusin 2024; Sampson 2024). Importantly, as ships traverse the globe, much of their time may be spent in international waters beyond any national jurisdiction. As such, they do not move from one state to another, but are situated at the intersection of multiple, and at times overlapping and/or conflicting jurisdictions (Bailey and Winchester 2012). This significantly complicates their status and claims to employment rights as accorded to nationally based workers (Fitzpatrick and Anderson 2005; ITF 2023; Winchester and Bailey 2012).

2.2 | The Organisational Context

Owners, often financial institutions, typically outsource the operations of their ships to third-party ship management companies, who in turn outsource the employment of seafarers to local crewing agencies. As such, workers are both physically and contractually remote from their managers and the shipowners, but subject to their direction and control (Sampson et al. 2019; Sampson 2024). Deployed on single voyage contracts (for up to a year at a time) with re-employment dependent upon a good end of voyage report generates precarity (Bailey 2006). The additional use of blacklisting of workers and a global oversupply of junior officers and ratings (Tang and Bhattacharya 2021), further intensifies these conditions leading seafarers to fear for their future employment.

The senior four officers (Captain, Chief Officer, Chief Engineer and Second Engineer) with greater experience and higher-level certification occupy a stronger labour market position and typically experience better conditions than those in lower ranks (Bailey and Winchester 2018; Walters and Bailey 2013). Nonetheless, employed on voyage contracts in the context of a global labour market they are still structurally vulnerable and recognise this to be the case (Sampson 2024) (Table 1).

The captain, as the shipowner's representative, has *de jure* if not *de facto*, control over all shipboard matters. However, with increased digital surveillance, autonomy is minimal (Sampson et al. 2019). Ship crews are relatively small, 12–24 individuals, dependent upon the type and size of ship, and typically of mixed nationality. Work organisation is strongly hierarchical and functionally organised and, typically, striated by nationality. Living and working within the confines of the vessel seafarers work long hours, organised into shifts that operate round the clock, 7 days a week, with limited time in port for rest or recreation (ILO 2004; Sampson 2024).

TABLE 1 | Typical shipboard crewing structure.

	Captain	
In command	**Deck department**	**Engineering department**
Officers	Chief Officer Second Officer Third Officer	Chief Engineer Second Engineer Third Engineer Fourth Engineer Electrical Engineer
(Trainee officer)	Deck Cadet	Engineering Cadet
Ratings	Bosun (Foreman)	Motorman
	Able Seaman	Fitter
	Ordinary Seaman	Wiper

Furthermore, with work groups differentiated by rank, department, nationality and working patterns, crews are fragmented, and individuals isolated and separated from shore-based support such as family and trade unions (Sampson 2024; Walters and Bailey 2013). As such, these organisational and institutional arrangements serve to isolate and individualise seafarers generating vulnerabilities, with little in the way of voice or power to challenge perceived injustices (Bailey 2006; Walters and Bailey 2013). At such times an individual's response reflects their perception of the options open to them as grounded in their subjective understanding of their situation. That is, how they frame their situation, the stories they tell themselves, inform the actions they take revealing their sense of self and agency (Griesbach 2025; Manolchev 2020; Sidoti 2015; Trappmann et al. 2024).

3 | Methods of Data Collection

The paper is based on qualitative interview data collected from international seafarers in 2019. A total of 30 interviews were undertaken with 36 seafarers of different ranks and 10 nationalities. Most were conducted individually, five were conducted as group interviews with two or three participants, at their request. Two were conducted online; the remainder were face-to-face. The first batch of 18 interviews, with 22 participants, was conducted with seafarers as they took shore leave in the port of Felixstowe. Felixstowe is a major container port on the east coast of England. Within the perimeter of the port is a

charity-run seafarers' welfare centre that provides a bus service for seafarers between their ships and the centre. The centre has a bar and shop as well as an area for seafarers to relax, watch TV, play pool, make phone calls and use computers. From here they can walk into the town of Felixstowe and the local pubs and supermarkets. One of the authors spent a week in the centre where seafarers were approached and invited to take part in an interview. Due to the limited time available, the interviews were mostly of 20–30 min duration, although a few extended to an hour.

A further 12 interviews with 15 individuals were conducted at a UK maritime training centre. The participants in these interviews were all British and Indian ships' officers, although some had previously worked in non-officer level positions. The interviews typically lasted between 1 and 3 h and allowed for more in-depth discussions.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, imported into NVivo and subject to thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017). Quotes from the interviews are presented verbatim with an identifier indicating nationality, rank and interview number.[1]

4 | Findings

A manifestation of precarity is changes to terms and conditions of employment (T&Cs), often at short notice, which workers are unable to resist (Felstead et al. 2020). In the next section, we highlight several such changes as reported by interviewees (Section 4.1) before turning our attention to how seafarers made sense of experiences of precarity through the deployment of three frames identified above: neoliberal (Section 4.2), defeatist (Section 4.3) and instrumental (Section 4.4). We note that even given the portrayal of the sea and seafaring in the public imaginary as a life of escape and freedom, the 'escapist' frame was not present in our data.

4.1 | Manifestations of Precarity: Changes to T&Cs

In this section, we present a series of perceived inequities related to changes to T&Cs as reported by interviewees exposing the precaritisation experienced.

Crew costs are the largest direct variable cost for ship operators (Stopford 2009). As such, increases in fixed costs (e.g., fuel costs), a downturn in market conditions (e.g., oversupply of vessels) or external shocks (e.g., COVID-19) incentivise owners to reduce labour cost by changing T&Cs (Bonacich and Wilson 2011; Campling and Colás 2021; ILO 2004). The regulatory regime predicated on the FOC system and its attendant employment practice grants shipowners the opportunity to burden labour with the consequence of changing market conditions; indeed, it is not unusual for their T&Cs to be changed while onboard ship.

Ratings and junior officers occupy the more precarious positions, and both groups reported imposed changes to their time onboard. For example, several Filipino ratings reported that their contracted time onboard was increased from 6 to 8 months. The reason given was that the ship was operating around Europe and to fly the seafarers from the Philippines to Europe meant increased costs of employing them. Hence, to ensure that Filipinos, as a group, remained competitive relative to European seafarers, they were required to spend longer time on-board, meaning fewer flights and less cost for the company. Likewise, an Indian Second Officer recounted how junior officers were notified, at short notice, that contracts had been changed and the length of time onboard increased.

> *[W]e got an email from the company stating that, in March … the Junior Officers …that means Indonesians, Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka … the contract will be for nine months, whereas the Europeans will be only four months.*
>
> #24

Arguably the most egregious inequity concerned the cutting of salaries of junior officers by 50% mid contract. This was reported by several groups of seafarers and generated heated discussion. They felt aggrieved by both the depth of the cut and the way it was done, which was seen as unfair and disrespectful, giving them limited choice in the matter.

> *RES: The salary, yeah…now for junior they reduce…They reduce. In half.*
> *INT: They're cutting your salary in half?*
> *RES: Almost in half.*
> *INT: When was that?*
> *RES: Maybe two months ago, one and a half months ago. They just like today come on the bridge, this is new contract, sign or go home, your choice…What choice did we have?*
>
> Montenegrin Third Engineer #12

The speed and manner in which T&Cs are diminished are afforded by the FOC system and its attendant regulatory regime which legitimate and normalise prevailing employment practice.

Not all variations to T&Cs were the result of explicit changes to agreed contracts. For instance, workers may be systematically underpaid due to withholding funds (ITF 2022), or less directly to work intensification, that is, lengthening working hours without additional compensation. As Bagnardi et al. (2024) note, at the micro level, where migrant workers live on site, it is easier to prolong working hours. This is particularly the case for seafarers aboard ships making frequent port calls, such as feeder container vessels, as most crew are required to be available for manoeuvring the vessel in and out of port—referred to as being 'at stations or standby'. Implemented at the shipboard level, such practices are responsive to the operational requirements of the sector underpinned by the industry-wide adoption of minimum safe crewing levels, as specified by flag states and international regulations.

> *Yes, we don't have enough time to sleep…Just work, and sleep.*
>
> Chinese Third Officer #06

[N]o sleep sometimes. They wake you up anytime, for the standbys. And things like that.

Filipino Able Seaman #08

Recognised to be a systemic issue, international regulation specifies hours of rest requirements. To comply with working hours regulations, interviewees were explicit that these could not realistically be met but the official records should comply with regulatory requirements; a fact that has been widely documented in the sector along with the fatigue that ensues (Baumler et al. 2021; Jepsen et al. 2015; Walters and Bailey 2013). It was widely perceived that failure to comply would lead to loss of employment.

The data also showed employers exploiting precaritising conditions by, for example, offering promises of promotion opportunities but never delivering, and an unwillingness to respond to cases of fatigue and exhaustion. For example, it is not uncommon for seafarers to be kept onboard well past the end of the contract.

RES: Oh shit, oh shit after seven months we cannot work on the ships. And chief officer is giving work, bosun [foreman] you do this, you do this, you do this. After seven months... that's my life... after seven months it's very tiring.
INT: So how long have you been on the ship now?
RES: Now, eight and a half months... and they're telling nine months, no I want to get down please... why I should stay on the ship?

Indian Bosun #09

Common to these cases is precaritising organisational practice that is incentivised by the prevailing economic conditions in the sector. That is, seafarer employment is insecure due to the dynamics and incentives within the sector, the employment structures, and the enabling condition of the governance regime, underpinned by the FOC system. Consequently, employers are not averse to making changes to T&Cs without consultation and, seemingly, encountering little resistance. Such arrangements appear, then, to undermine the viability of individual agency and reveal deep power asymmetries redolent of precarity.

4.2 | Making Sense of Precarity: A Neoliberal Framing

Having identified some of the ways in which precarity is manifested, we now consider how seafarers made sense of, and responded to, the issues raised. That is, we examine how they drew on each of the different frames identified in the literature in making sense of their situation; the first is the neoliberal framing.

Neoliberalists write of the centrality and normative significance of individuals pursuing their own aims by voluntarily entering employment contracts (Powell 2014). Going to sea requires deliberate and sustained action, including considerable time at a maritime college training, irrespective of rank, and expenditure (often involving considerable debt), prior to securing employment. Interviewees also recognised costs borne by leaving home and going to work in a distant and dangerous environment away from friends and family for extended periods of time. Indeed, it is common to hear seafarers talking of 'sacrificing' their present selves and time spent with family and friends, for their families', especially their children's, futures (Lamvik and Bye 2004; Sampson 2024). Earning sufficient income to provide for their children's education was frequently stated as the primary motivation to work at sea:

You give education to the children.

Indian Bosun #09

My plan is to give a nice education to my children.

Filipino Able Seaman #16

Seafarers thus presented themselves as individualised rational economic agents, actively seeking employment with the aspiration of bettering their lives and those of their family.

This individualisation carries through in their understanding of the negotiation and acceptance of employment contracts as individual matters. Emphasising their agency, they made clear it was their decision to accept an employment contract.

It's okay. I signed a contract, nobody pushed me... We sign the contract voluntarily, when it's done, the contract I sign off and if I'm good, if I prove myself, they call me again.

Serbian Third Officer #01

Continued employment is similarly understood in terms of individual performance; this was a commonly heard refrain, that hard work leads to a good report and is the route to re-employment.

Reflecting on perceived injustices in relation to T&Cs, seafarers often emphasised their choice. For example, it was recognised that some crewmembers, doing the same job, received more pay based on their country of origin. The response was an acceptance of the conditions predicated on the individual taking responsibility for their decision:

It's okay, it makes me a little bit upset, but what to do. I agree when I sign the contract I agree to join on that money, that salary. I work, and I did my job, there's no excuse for myself.

Ukrainian Chief Engineer #11

The recognition that others have done better in this regard may be a matter for regret, but it is seen as an individual matter and not out of line with the existing practice and norms of the sector. While some companies do have union-negotiated Collective Bargaining Agreements (Anner et al. 2006), interviewees had little knowledge of this or the role of trades unions more generally. Instead, they simply entered into an agreement with a local crewing agent; as such, they saw it as a personal rather

than collective issue. Such views, while presented in terms of a relationship between the seafarer and employer are formed against the background of a national system of crewing agents and a global seafarer labour market in which unionisation and collective bargaining is limited and weak.

When seafarers discussed broader aspects of the maritime sector, for example, the FOC system, this was raised in the context of the economic viability of the employer rather than the diminution of rights and power within the employment relation. For example, when reflecting on the ability of employers to impose variations to contractual T&Cs, the neoliberal frame was reinforced through a narrative of it being a natural response to market conditions. Several interviewees, typically in senior roles, attempted to legitimise changes to T&Cs on behalf of owners, by reference to economic volatility—reiterating a market-based discourse.

> *Okay now the condition changing you know, the economy, cos I think this all, the shipping industry ... they're getting the problem, financial problem. And they try to change the flag, changing the condition for the contracts... And of course the, 60% of the ship's expenses...is the seafarer salary... So that everybody looking for some deduction, lowering and everything, of course. Yeah, and finally they change the contract.*
>
> Polish Captain #05

Equally, some in lower ranks, explaining how their voyage lengths had been extended reported it as a positive.

> *Yes, that's why we get the eight months, but before we only got six... they decided to give us a little bit longer so they can compete with the market.*
>
> Filipino Rating #02

For these interviewees, whose re-employment was more tenuous, a longer voyage not only ensured their economic viability but was also deemed beneficial because it meant a longer period of guaranteed income.

Importantly in these cases, the changes made were viewed as impersonal. They affected a group of individuals and were perceived to be in response to conditions within the sector that were understandable in terms of the structures and norms that shape activity aboard ship and within the sector more widely, for example, the need for port calls and firm profitability. By drawing on a neoliberal frame, interviewees were able to give an economic rationalisation for their experience, understood in terms of the neoliberal tropes of individual responsibility, individual agency and individual effort (Bloom 2017).

4.3 | Responding to Precarity: A Defeatist Framing

The neoliberal frame involves identification with the economic rationality of the sector and its expression within shipboard work; agency is understood as the individual being responsible for and meriting their success (Sandel 2020). However, seafarers also expressed an alternative frame, we term 'defeatism', in which this idea of agency is absent and there are only conditions which one endures (Harris and Ogbonna 2024). There is a distancing from neoliberal practices but allied to a perception that little can be done, either individually or collectively. There were, however, differences in the expression of this frame, depending upon the nature of the perceived inequity and whether it affected individuals or groups.

When making sense of precarity that affects an individual, defeatism derived from the experience of the shipboard organisation of labour; in particular, the way in which an initial complaint is closed down. For example, with the bosun whose trip length kept being extended, the failure to provide a replacement affected him as an individual, it was not an issue related more widely to the sector (although it was not an uncommon experience). He tolerated the extension but, like many others in a similar situation, he attempted to voice his concerns to effect change. Interviewees reported that the first recourse in such situations is to speak to the immediate supervisor and ultimately the captain, who is expected to act on the seafarer's behalf and mediate with management. Interviewees reported that they were able to follow this route with varying success dependent upon relevant individuals and the company. However, having raised the issue there was little further recourse, other than to put up with the situation. The resolution of the issue lay in the hands of the company managers. Starting as a narrative of resistance and the possibility of change, the shipboard experience leads to defeatism in which nothing can be done.

By comparison, when changes to contracts affected groups of workers, there was little sense of the possibility of pursuing a complaint or enacting resistance; defeatism here springs from the shared exposure to the structural context of the sector and its precaritising practices. Recalling the Indian Second Officer, above, who reported that the time onboard for junior officers from certain countries had been increased, his view of this was clear:

> *I think it's racial discrimination.*
>
> #24

However, despite the sense of injustice and strength of feeling in such cases, there was an awareness of the structural context in which they worked and a resigned acceptance of their situation; in which workers are subject to a set of precaritising structures that limit agential capacity to respond.

This defeatism extends to an understanding of the value of, and prospects for, collective action. When asked about taking collective action, interviewees commonly responded that they were individuals and that they had to take care of themselves.

> *[I]f we are getting job that is enough, finish. We seamen cannot do anything nowadays, seamen cannot do it.*
>
> Indian Bosun #09

> *What can we do? If you want to complain on your own...*
>
> Filipino Able Seaman #08

Such cases were seen as beyond the reach of the shipboard management team, reflecting the limited authority of those onboard. No-one suggested that the shipboard management could resolve the situation. Indeed, the captains interviewed sounded as frustrated and helpless as others. As one commented when asked about the possibility of taking action to address perceived inequities:

> *We are the seafarers, we don't have nothing. So you must to take care by yourself.*
>
> Polish Captain #05

In this quote, we see that defeatism is inflected by a narrative of individualism, that is, the resigned acceptance generates a retreat to the self which endures and undergoes suffering. The more defeatism takes hold in each individual member of a group, the more collective action is lost as a narrative at the level of the group. Employed on a voyage only contract and subject to a good appraisal for re-employment, all were equally vulnerable. As a senior engineer who had worked for his company for many years on repeat contracts reported, he still felt uncertain each time he went home as to whether he would be re-employed.

> *Every time when you go home, so you are free agent, you know, you are your own free agent, so you are without job, I'm sailing there 11 years, never mind if he don't like to call you, he don't... he will not even inform you, he will just not call you anymore. After four months, five months, you call, ah, we don't need you anymore.*
>
> Montenegrin Chief Engineer #12

As such, when faced with significant changes in T&Cs, such as a lower salary to that initially agreed, seafarers reported that they had no way to resist the changes; the only choice they had was to see-out their contracts and seek employment elsewhere.

In these examples, we see how seafarers constrained by the micro and macro arrangements within the maritime sector appeared to frame their acceptance of perceived inequities in terms of resigned acceptance and lack of opportunity to mount substantive resistance, essentially a defeatism. We now turn to the third frame utilised to make sense of precarity.

4.4 | Responding to Precarity: An Instrumental Framing

Both the defeatist and neoliberal frames focus on the employment experience of being a seafarer, when asked about broader aspiration for their future, many seafarers commented on their planned progression through the shipboard hierarchy. However, some explained that they planned to progress in their career at sea as a means to achieving a shore based managerial position or to save sufficient capital to start a small business in their home country. As such, seafaring serves to generate capital and/or experience to exit the shipboard life and achieve a desired future.

Future ambitions tended to vary by rank. Those with limited experience and in positions lower in the hierarchy, that is, junior officers and some ratings, had short-term ambitions to go to college and obtain the certification to gain promotion. However, such career developments were embedded in broader aspirations, and more experienced individuals tended to focus on life beyond seafaring. Ratings frequently referred to starting their own business such as buying a taxi or opening a small shop, while junior officers typically aspired to shore-based careers in shipping.

> *INT: How long do you hope to stay at sea?*
> *RES: I think about, I'm thirty now so I'll be forty-five years old.*
> *INT: Okay and then what do you think you'll do...?*
> *RES: Maybe some business.*
>
> Filipino Able Seaman #02

In the main, only senior officers saw themselves as continuing in their seafaring career. That is, for most interviewees, their current work was a step to some preferred occupation.

Equally when confronted with perceived unfair treatment by their line managers, it was not unusual to hear seafarers comment that, as their time onboard is considerably longer than their seniors, they would simply accept the situation in the knowledge that it was for a finite duration until the individual was replaced. The frame here serves as a qualified acceptance of extant conditions. The now is tolerated to achieve a desired future.

From the interviews, we see that aspirations are informed by pay and the ability to save, voyage duration, time away from family, the acceptance of sacrifice and providing for children's education. But also, the need for skills and training and the rate of progression, reliant on both labour market conditions and shipboard reports.

5 | Discussion

Seafarers are central to the operation of global supply chains but are largely invisible. Despite being skilled qualified workers operating within a defined career structure, their work context is constituted by a set of precaritising conditions. Moreover, seafarers reported unfair treatment in relation to their T&Cs of employment. Their responses are framed by their understanding of the structural context of the sector, their experience of work across multiple vessels, the shipboard organisation of labour and the options available to them in a given context. As such seafarers flexed between the different frames present in our data (i.e., neoliberal, defeatist and instrumental).

Within a neoliberal frame, seafarers view themselves as free agents; they actively undertook costly and timely training and sought out maritime work as an opportunity make a better life for themselves and their families. And, in gaining employment, they took responsibility for the negotiation of their contracts and their actions onboard to secure continued employment. Moreover, in making sense of their experience of inequity, comments speak to embracing a market-based logic; viewing their situation through an economic lens where effort and merit

are rewarded in a manner aligned with the economic interests of their employer.

Within the defeatist frame, the economic volatilities in the sector, the use of voyage only contracts and the inability to raise effective complaint in the context of the shipboard hierarchy constitute an immovable context which generate inequities and constrains responses. As such the individual simply endures; even when precaritising conditions affect the group, the narrative is of the individual defeated by the situation confronted. And, the idea of collective action fails to find even rhetorical purchase.

It is important to recognise, however, that underpinning each of the three frames is a set of expectations and aspirations. Seafarer understandings are not only tied to the immediate context but to their wider experiences of the sector and the significance of this job in their lives. Even from within a defeatist framing, acceptance is qualified and grounded in the fact that they, as free agents, chose to enter this situation as being supportive of their life goals and aspirations. Consequently, seafarers accept that this is how things are, but only insofar as the perceived inequities do not fundamentally undermine their expectations or life plans (Wong and Chow 2020).

Hence, in response to significant changes to their T&Cs that undermined their aspirations (e.g., to gain promotion, provide for their children's education), seafarers chose to exit and seek an alternative employer within the sector. Whilst exit is acknowledged as an agential response to precarity, this is often discussed in the context of low-skill, low-prospect jobs (Bagnardi et al. 2024; Hagan et al. 2011) whereas seafaring is highly structured with clear hierarchies and progression routes requiring formal certification necessitating commitment of both time and money. While the resort to exit might be seen as indicative of a loss of agency and control over their lives (Alberti et al. 2018), as others have argued, it can be seen as a positive, if weak, expression of agency (Alberti 2014; Hagan et al. 2011; Smith 2006). The contractual nature of employment that constitutes precarity is here reframed as potential mobility, a mobility that enables future aspiration. This is not to reduce their sensemaking to that of *homo economicus*, rather the point is that their understandings of their work situation and options available are informed by their life plans, previous experiences and sense of what is possible in the context that confronts them at a given time (Manolchev 2020; Trlifajová and Formánková 2023).

Whilst some authors have suggested workers draw on a single frame as a distinct and stable mode of understanding (Trappmann et al. 2024), there is a small body of literature that documents how workers can shift between different framings based on the institutional context (Griesbach 2025; Irwin 2018; Miles et al. 2011; Sidoti 2015). Our research adds to this position. In our data, seafarers draw on aspects of the different frames as a pragmatic response to a given context, and this shifting in orientation should not be seen as irrational or ad hoc rationalisation. Rather by acknowledging the underpinning aspirations and wider understandings of their context, temporal and relational, we argue that the accounts provided portray an agential and nuanced response to precarity. Sensemaking is indexed to aspiration and the current work onboard a vessel is a means to achieve the desired future. Hence the experience of inequity in the context of precaritising conditions is understood in relation to both the context confronted and the underpinning aspiration, for example, to support one's family, achieve a short-term goal, or further a career. Importantly, all seafarers in making sense of their situation, reported that they considered it in the context of a range of factors, that included the labour market in their home country, terms and conditions offered by other companies, their past employment experiences, future aspirations and their position within the occupational hierarchy.

In agreement with the broader literature on precarity and neoliberalism we note that the frames themselves are marked by the emphasis on the individual; it is the individual that takes on aspects of the ideology of neoliberalism and its narrative of meritocracy, the individual who accepts their fate, the individual who navigates the work context to achieve their aspirations (Bloom 2017; Trappmann et al. 2024; Sandel 2020). As such, although there is some limited awareness of collective forms of representation, the language of collective action was absent, whether in informal collective action within a vessel or more formal collective action mediated through unions. It does appear, that at least for our participants, the language of individualism, formed on the basis of both ideology and experience, has seeped through to the way in which seafarers make sense of and respond to precarity.

6 | Conclusion

From our data, seafarers as maritime professionals have developed an individualised understanding of their relationship to their employment. It is an individual choice to accept a contract and the consequent conditions to achieve their aspirations for a better life. That is, they see it as a matter for the individual with little recognition or awareness of the possibilities of collective bargaining or action. This arguably fits with a strongly expressed sense of individual agency, in that these individuals have actively sought to find a better life for themselves and their families often at great personal cost. They are taking advantage of an economic opportunity. At the same time, they are situated within a web of socio-cultural, political and economic practices and institutions that isolate and individualise them, making the possibility of collective action, at best, extremely challenging.

Previous authors have suggested that in such contexts, fear of unemployment can lead workers to adopt a 'defeatist' attitude to their situation (Anner 2015). Whilst a defeatist tone does ring out from some of the quotes, we argue that it is necessary to recognise the central significance of workers underpinning aspirations and its contribution to sensemaking. Seafarers flex between nuanced forms of acceptance, exercise of voice (if limited) and narratives of exit from a particular employment relationship and, in so doing, take responsibility for their actions as free agents while also recognising inequities and limited options for redress. In recognising the constraint on achieving change, in terms of a competitive job market and lack of supportive structures, they make sense of their work experience from the perspective of an agentic but isolated individual. However, this should not be seen as defeatism *tout court* rather it is the expression of pragmatic judgement in light of the situation faced.

Such circumstances may limit the range of options open to seafarers, and particularly the idea of collective action, but they can still express their agency. Exit is a rational strategy for individuals that see themselves within an occupational sector rather than a specific workplace; they can imagine an alternative future as active agents, a future in which they can sustain their aspirations, even within a present inflected with injustice and frustration.

In exploring these frames, we have provided insight into the experiences of a group of skilled and globally important workers. We have highlighted some of the workplace inequities that they face that are typically hidden from sight, and importantly how these workers orient themselves to their situation. We have further argued that in understanding their experiences and how they frame them, we need to look at the circumstances, in particular the structure of ownership and control predicated on the FOC system, the embedded use of precarious forms of contractual employment, and the shipboard organisation of labour, in which individuals act. Informed pragmatic judgements underpinned by real-world aspirations and commitments reveal that a sense of individual agency is central to how seafarers make sense of their working lives.

Crucially, however, such responses do not negate the real inequities highlighted and the need for improved regulation of working conditions. Furthermore, recognition of the pragmatic nature of seafarers' understandings both helps to explain their acceptance of precaritising work but also leaves open the possibility of collectively organising this key group of workers. They are not enthralled to neoliberal ideology or practice but are pragmatic in orientation, and as such potentially open to arrangements that might support their aspirations.

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Endnotes

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