

CONFERENCE ON "ENHANCING THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE MARITIME PROFESSIONS"

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

ADDRESS BY PHILIPPE ALFONSO

Panel 3: Practical measures adopted in the maritime industry at European level

First of all, allow me to sincerely thank EESC, and Ms Bredima in particular, for the excellent initiative to hold a Conference on such an important topic, i.e. to give a new and dynamic impulse to employment in the sector.

Let me remind you very briefly who we are. Our Pan-European organisation has 225 member organizations in the various modes of transport and fisheries, active in 41 European countries and championing the interests of 2.5 million workers. In the maritime transport, 77 seafarers' unions spread in 33 European countries, among which all EU countries, are affiliated to our federation. They represent 271,400 seafarers! Armed with this sound representativeness, I will speak on their behalf.

Promoting jobs in the maritime transport is actually a primary concern of the ETF Seafarers' Section. European Trade Unions have been examining in great depth the employment crisis in the Community maritime transport. Ratings are particularly hit and increasingly replaced by third-country sea-going workers. A similar trend can be now observed among officers. However, European officers seem to be worth some worrying attention but ETF is deeply preoccupied by the indifference and total lack of interest of European decision-makers and shipowners for the ratings' real plight. ETF relies on you, Mr. Coleman for offsetting this situation.

ETF is of the opinion that assimilating the crisis to only a labour shortage is too simplistic and misleading since it would only unveil part of a very complex situation. Therefore instead of a problem of attractiveness, I shall prefer to pinpoint and highlight obstacles on the path towards boosting maritime employment which will be developed in this address.

For a very large number of years, a campaign has been deployed urging the European Institutions and decision-makers to take all necessary steps to create more and better jobs at sea. A street action was organized on 14 October 2008 which gathered over 1,200 seafarers from all corners of the EU. A Seminar was held at the European Parliament just after the demonstration to stir up the

awareness of the European Commission highest representatives and as a consequence – very likely -, Commissioner Tajani decided in the same breath to set up a Task Force on employment and competitiveness in the industry to respond to this real call for help. ETF welcomes the initiative and believes that a fruitful co-operation will be woven with you, Mr Coleman, who has been entrusted with this mission.

Furthermore, over the last years, ETF has drummed up a campaign focusing on the ferry sector which employs most of the crews in some EU countries (though not all) and is also losing its national seafarers under the social dumping pressures.

Finally, I will make reference to the EU-funded project in which we are involved. It is precisely dealing with recruitment and training in the industry, and consequently touches upon the concept of attractiveness of the maritime professions.

Beyond its own and its affiliates' activism, ETF is also a committed and responsible social partner at European level. The following examples illustrate my assertion:

- The Agreement on the organisation of working time of seafarers (September 1998);
- In 2004, the Adoption by the social partners of training guidelines and tools aimed at eradicating harassment and bullying practices on the workplace, including a gender equality chapter aimed at rendering the working environment more friendly to women;
- In September 2005, a study was produced on the Mapping of Career Paths in the Maritime Industry (covering both seagoing and on-shore employees);
- More recently in 2008, after a two-year negotiating process, ETF and ECSA concluded a Social Agreement with a view to incorporating some of 2006 ILO Maritime Labour Convention provisions in the EU law.

Though progress has been achieved in the SSDC and ought to be recognized, challenges are by far too significant and cannot be responded by the social partners only, above all in the light of some fundamental diverging views and inconclusive developments which would have needed a real will to be redressed. One practical example is the hypothetic agreement between social partners on crew's conditions onboard regular passenger and ferry services operating between Member States (the so-called and well-known Manning Directive). Since no progress is being made, ETF turns to the EU law-maker and asks for a new regulatory framework. Indeed, how could it be a serious objective to promote maritime employment whereas no measures are being adopted to counteract social dumping?

For ETF, it is of primary importance to denounce the current dominant assertions which are invariably supported by most shipowners claiming that the shipping industry can only be regulated at global level on the grounds that it is more vulnerable to international competition. On the contrary, the promotion of maritime professions in Europe must be supported by a body of regulatory provisions and voluntaristic policies which were clearly detailed in the ETF Charter for EU seafarers which was intended for political decision-makers and is available in this room. I invite you to read it in full because I will only refer to a few major demands contained in this Charter, inter alia:

- The need for an EU-wide recognised seafarer-training certificate;
- The necessary revision of the State aid guidelines in a way to strengthen the link between the granting of aid and the employment of EU nationals. And I must say that I am very grateful to Ms Bredima for having mentioned, on her report that state aid “should in principle be granted only to flags within the EU”.
- Laying down equal entitlements for on-shore and seagoing employees;
- Fostering the adoption of regulatory measures on competition in the intra-EU trade sector (flags of convenience must be applied the same rules as EU flags);
- The right to safe conditions of employment (including maximum hours of employment and adequate manning for the duties required for the safe operation of vessels);
- The right for the protection by law (in view of the increasing criminalization of seafarers, there is need to protect those at sea to the same standards as provided on land).

To respond to these challenges, I am afraid the measures contained in the Commission Communication (2009)0008 are not equal to the challenges, all the more so since they are just a declaration of intent. Hopefully the Task Force will path the way towards a vigorous response both from EU and its Member States.

Prior to analyzing the lack of attractiveness of our industry, it has to be borne in mind that substandard ships and the increasing number of flags of convenience over the past years have deeply modified the context and have had far-reaching effects on training and jobs in EU countries with maritime traditions. This being said, does the shortage of labour in the maritime sector originate only in the below-average attractiveness of onboard occupations? Have potential applicants for sea-going careers lost any kind of interest or are they instead demoralized by the prevailing conditions in the sector?

A number of factors have been mentioned and the attendees are well aware of them: poor living and working conditions on board, the difficult reconciliation

between work and family life, living far away from one's kins, long working hours, ISPS Code requirements making even more difficult the shore leave of seafarers, problems of communication with the external world, physical nuisances like noise and vibration exposure, the tendency to criminalize the crew when an accident occurs, acts of piracy, cultural differences within a crew, the ignorance by the public at large of the range of maritime occupations, plus travelling which becomes less and less appealing in a context of increasing low-cost travel possibilities for globetrotting generations. Every single factor hereabove mentioned has a negative impact on what was a vocation. All together, they have an exponentially multiplying negative impact on employment.

Other parameters are less often mentioned though they deserve some attention like the weakening of both the responsibilities and autonomy of onboard staff as a result of an increased automation of operations and higher volume of reporting procedures. All these developments are de-professionalizing sea-going jobs. Another aspect is as important as the former one, i.e. the changing relationship between the seafarer and his employer which tends to be less and less a person-to-person relation. Let us start by the recruitment too often entrusted to temps or manning agencies which induces the feeling now internalized by seafarers of being hired just to obey orders, easy to replace, fulfilling a broad range of assignments, in the general context of a poor human resources policy. Finally, the absence of collective agreements on board aggravates the current disaffection (seafarers covered by collective agreements have more sustainable careers).

ETF calls upon the EU and the Member States to deploy and implement all measures which may mitigate or remove the mentioned obstacles. Huge challenges are ahead of us and could not be responded with simplistic solutions. Actually the most relevant issue is not the lack of attractiveness. The core and real issue is somewhat more challenging, i.e. for whom (which shipowners?), what for (enrich the cluster?) and how (education structure?) to train seafarers, more particularly officers? Indeed, any honest reflection on the promotion of jobs would not be comprehensive without addressing the issue of clusters and the lay-up/refit managerial policy, plus the urgent need to invest in vocational training possibilities and structures (both vocational and academic).

To remedy the job losses, the maritime clusters are considered by a few stakeholders as a panacea. Our view is that seafarers'employability does exist within the clusters but it is not at all exceptional or miraculous. Maritime clusters are not formalised and well organised in all EU countries (the Netherlands is an exception), and many countries have no experienced a significant clustering process. The idea that jobs lost at sea could be compensated by jobs created on

shore is to be denounced. We need both! ETF recalls once again that the shortage of European seafarers will affect the maritime clusters sooner or later.

One interesting development has to be commented here. In parallel with those who aim at developing a sea-going career from school to retirement (their number is decreasing) it seems that a pretty large number of young people following a maritime training do not envisage any longer sea-going jobs but other types of maritime jobs, forms of employability, on shore. These developments may be seen as desirable if supported by educational systems and taken into consideration in the career path management by the shipping industry. With a multidisciplinary training, multiskilled workers may enter the profession – both on shore and off shore – with better employability prospects and reconcile the companies' needs and the legitimate aspirations of workers, i.e. better reconcile their seafarer's job with their social and family life.

To challenge the attractiveness of maritime occupations requires that be challenged the managerial policies of the European shipping industry. Lionel Honoré, professor at the Rennes University, develops this dimension in an investigation on French officers of the merchant navy ("Du métier à la carrière" – June 2009). He tries to highlight how the managerial policies and human resources management of shipping companies are lagging behind, obsolete. The legal, social, economic environment in which companies are operating is changing radically. Did the managerial policies of shippowners evolve and follow the same path? I am afraid not. Apart from his duties as seagoing personnel, officers could be regarded as manager (and it might be what some of them would like to do more): i.e. to manage human beings, skills and performances, in view of their foothold in the core organization of the company. Instead, human resources management is now limited, according to the author, to signing labour contracts, managing career promotions and training (kept at the lowest level) without taking into consideration all the abovementioned dimensions. It would therefore be interesting to think about the need for shipping companies to invest into the career, skill and knowledge management of the "sailors". The problem is that shipping companies are more interested in a short-term policy aimed at obtaining rapidly a return on their investment. This is the reason why the social costs are reduced down to the lowest level, why they hire more and more third-country workers whom they have sometimes helped train themselves (via the outsourcing of training in South-East Asian countries). With so little, even no investment, in the human factor, do shipping companies realize that they sacrifice their own key factors of efficiency and determining competitive advantages? I am afraid not!

To conclude, by now it should be undoubtedly crystal clear in your minds that the issue of the lack of attractiveness of maritime occupations is not in my view the most relevant one at a time when there is a growing shortage of EU labour in the European shipping industry. Would you be surprised if you heard that the sea was not appealing to highly qualified skippers of sailboats while sailing conditions were appalling in heavy seas? EU maritime employment is in turmoil, caught in heavy seas, and to recreate a more serene environment is the only way to revitalize jobs at sea for European skilled seafarers. To turn around the current situation, information campaigns for young people and Erasmus-like exchanges between trainees are less helpful than improving significantly the living and working conditions on board, to develop an education policy which upgrade both the quality and the quantity while responding to the industry's needs, to create the necessary regulatory framework (and the EU has a prominent role to play) or to boost managerial practices and adapt them to the actual situation of a very dynamic industry, which ought to be innovative and offer quality jobs. This is the message that seafarers' trade unions want to put across loud and clear, to be heard by political decision-makers and economic operators of the sector.

Thank you for your attention!

Brussels, 11 March 2010