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Check against delivery

I am delighted to be able to address you this morning on a subject of such critical importance to Europe. I would like to congratulate the organisers for staging an event that is both topical and urgent.

Shipping is an industry of fundamental economic, environmental and strategic significance. And to operate safely and efficiently, the ever-more technologically advanced and sophisticated ships in today's fleets need to have capable, committed and intelligent people in control.

So, as this conference rightly notes, we face a massive challenge in recruiting and retaining the maritime professionals that we need - both afloat and ashore.

To start with, however, I would challenge the often common assumption that European youngsters don't want to go to sea any more. I would suggest that the real problem is not a shortage of bright and able recruits, but rather a shortage of training opportunities for them. And consequently a shortage of committed European Shipowners ready to offer those training opportunities and subsequently employ European seafarers.

For more than 30 years now we have watched a lemming-like rush by traditional maritime nations to the still-growing ranks of flags of convenience, led by the siren calls of major savings through the use of low-cost crews from developing nations.

That process has had a profound impact on levels of seafarer training and employment in traditional maritime nations. And it has also had a profound impact on the nature of life and work at sea.

Even now, in the last bastions of EU maritime employment - such as the ferry industry - we are witnessing this process at work, exerting negative pressures on pay, conditions and job security.

So, let's not box ourselves into a corner in which we automatically accept the negative statement that Europeans are no longer interested in working at sea. In fact, maritime training continues to offer remarkable opportunities - both afloat and on land - and a unique range of attractions to young people, including travel, early responsibility, variety, long holidays and decent pay.

It's a powerful mix, and one that means that in the UK, for example, the few companies that do train turn down many more applicants than the limited number of places on offer.

But this is not to say that we should be complacent about the attractiveness of the maritime career. The steady erosion of public awareness of shipping and factors such as criminalisation, privacy and the poor image of the industry all conspire to downgrade and diminish the pool of potential new seafarers.

We are in a mess, and it is one that stands to get much messier. You all know the statistics about the shocking scale of the decline in the EU seafaring workforce and the growing global gap between demand and supply of skilled, experience and

competent seafarers. The staggering slump in EU seafarer training since the 1980s means we are now staring into an abyss where vast numbers are due to retire in the next 10 to 15 years, with nowhere near sufficient young people following in their footsteps.

This is creating a crisis of catastrophic proportions and unless radical remedial action is undertaken now, Europe will face serious problems in operating its maritime networks - both regionally and internationally - and in maintaining a significant presence as an international maritime player.

So, we have to wake up to the fact that skilled seafarers are an increasingly scarce resource. And, as with other fragile and finite resources, they need to be nurtured and protected.

When we ask, quite rightly, at events such as this, how we can enhance that attractiveness of the maritime profession, who better to ask than the seafarers themselves?

Simple, isn't it? Yet, genuine attempts to discover the views and experiences of the maritime workforce are few on the ground.

The ITF did a major research project in 1995, and my union is this week publishing the results of its third survey of seafarers' working conditions since 1990. The Nautilus study draws on detailed questionnaires completed by almost 10% of the UK-based seagoing membership and, on the positive side, shows that there have been marked improvements in members' perceptions of their pay, morale, job security, training, workloads, and onboard recreational facilities over the past 20 years.

However, considerable concerns remain - with the survey showing high levels of disquiet with the quality of life at sea -- and there is absolutely no room for complacency at a time when the industry continues to face immense long-term recruitment and retention challenges. Satisfaction levels have decreased over the past decade in such important areas as contact with home and family.

The survey revealed a continued decline in the traditional employment pattern of seafarers working directly for shipping companies and more than two-thirds of members said company loyalty has declined over the past decade, with job satisfaction continuing to be eroded by the drift to offshore terms and conditions or employment through remotely located employers.

It is clear that the growth in the casualised nature of agency work is creating fundamental shifts in attitude among professional seafarers. Many stated their disenchantment with such employment relationships and the way it adversely affects meaningful dialogue on their pay and conditions. Responses noted the frequent imposition of pay rises (or freezes) and the way in which reviews are often made on a 'take it or leave it' basis.

Whilst more than three-quarters of those taking part in the survey considered their ships had sufficient seafarers for safe operations, many added comments to indicate that this was only in normal operating conditions and not in the event of an emergency or sufficient to maintain the vessel to the desired standards.

A significant number of members also expressed concern at problems caused by rapid turnover of crew, 'grossly inexperienced' officers being put into higher ranks because of skill shortages, and fatigue resulting from minimum manning levels.

Whilst our survey shows that things have got better in many areas since the first study we did 20 years ago, there are still serious areas for concern. More than 50% of members said shipboard morale has declined in the past decade, 58% said workloads had increased and 53% said stress was up over the same period.

Significant numbers also consider there has been a deterioration in the areas of shore leave (45%), personal morale (44%), job satisfaction (42%) and fatigue (43%).

The most common complaint highlighted in members' comments is the deterioration in social life onboard, followed by food, competence of fellow crew, lack of shore leave, and criminalisation. There were also a significant number of calls for onboard gym equipment and recreational facilities, the return of access to alcohol onboard, and satellite TV. Other issues highlighted included:

- poor standards of training
- inexperienced junior officers and crew
- poor management/lack of proper consultation and negotiation
- high turnover of crew
- language problems among multinational crews
- poor standards of build quality
- poor onboard social life
- no opportunities to go ashore
- fraudulent certificates or apparent lack of adequate checks on certificates (including CECs)
- insecure employment
- noise and vibration in cabins

The survey shows very clearly the factors considered to be most important in improving life at sea: more pay (32%), better communications with home (27%), and better training and improved shipboard facilities (both 20%).

We argue that this survey should offer important signals to regulators, ship owners, managers and employers about the actions they need to take to encourage the recruitment and retention of the maritime professionals required by our essential industry.

The results show that there are still deep-rooted and far-reaching issues that need to be properly addressed by the industry and those who regulate it. Despite the improvements in overall satisfaction levels during the past 20 years, the feedback we gathered shows that many maritime professionals are deeply unhappy with some of the core elements of their working lives - with problems that create extensive demoralisation and demotivation.

I believe these findings serve to illustrate the gap between the acknowledgement of the importance of human factors at the highest level, and the way the issues continue to be ignored at the sharp end. And there could be no stronger illustration of the negative impact this creates than the following comments made on the survey forms:

‘There just aren’t any opportunities really for me to socialise during my days onboard and it has made me decide to look for another career. I started this job full of enthusiasm, but I just feel tired and miserable all the time now.’

‘Generally many UK seafarers are very gloomy about the long term employment prospects for Europeans at sea. Too many companies are driven purely on cost and will do almost anything to reduce costs by employing cheap crews with dubious training and experience.’

‘I have been involved recently in promoting the Merchant Navy as a career for school leavers and young people. To be honest, I have a hard time looking them in the eye and telling them that it’s a great lifestyle because on the whole I don’t really think it is. More and more I have come to realise that I simply work for the money and I get very little satisfaction from my work at all.’

‘I would not recommend going to sea as a career to anybody due to the criminalisation of seafarers and the stress involved in the job.’

So where do we go from here? How do we avert this looming crisis before it spirals out of control? The ITF believes there is an urgent and increasing need for regulatory measures and changes in shipping company policies to end the vicious circle that has undermined the seafaring profession in recent decades.

We are hopeful that the introduction of the Maritime Labour Convention will address many of the worst problems, and I would implore everyone here to all they can to ensure that EU member states sign up to it as soon as possible.

However, it is clear that more concerted measures are required to improve the policing of ‘human factors’ and the enforcement of decent social, working and living conditions for the crew -- including elements such as wages, working hours, communications, personal safety and welfare. Governments must support the MLC by devoting the necessary resources to enable concentrated programmes of PSC inspections to enforce its provisions and to address the ‘human element’ issues within STCW and ILO requirements.

We need to see widespread adoption of the IMO/ILO guidelines for the fair treatment of seafarers following maritime incidents and the Code for the Investigation of Maritime Accidents to end the process of criminalisation.

And we desperately need more effective controls against fatigue and inadequate manning, together with action to enforce adequate crew complements and prevent unfair competition through relaxed interpretation of international standards.

To tackle the problems of difficulties with shore leave, we need a concerted drive to ratify and apply the international convention on seafarers’ identity documents, ILO Convention 185. Governments must stop treating seafarers as if they were part of the security problem and start treating them as a partner in seeking the solutions.

And if Europe is serious about safeguarding its long-term supply of seafaring skills, it needs to do more to protect its maritime professionals against unfair and unscrupulous competition on labour costs. This process must start in our own backyard, with effective controls against exploitation in intra-EU trades.

And Europe not only needs to maintain, but also enhance the way in which the State Aid Guidelines can be used to support the training and employment of EU seafarers and encourage EU Shipowners to provide training and employment opportunities for European youngsters.

To conclude: seafarers are a special group of workers. Life at sea is very different from life ashore, creating unique demands on the maritime workforce, coupled with the inherent dangers of working in frequently challenging conditions and long periods away from friends and family.

In the 21st century it is simply not acceptable to see so many seafarers being treated in ways that were more appropriate in the 19th century - or, in the case of piracy, the 18th century.

This conference is of the utmost importance to the future of the European maritime profession - and, I would suggest, to the future prosperity of Europe itself, as our continued dependence on seafarers, ships and the sea is undiminished. I hope I have managed to convey the issues that seafarers themselves regard as essential for their future, and I hope that all of you will do all you can to make the progress that we so desperately need.

Thank you.