

the global

SEAFARER



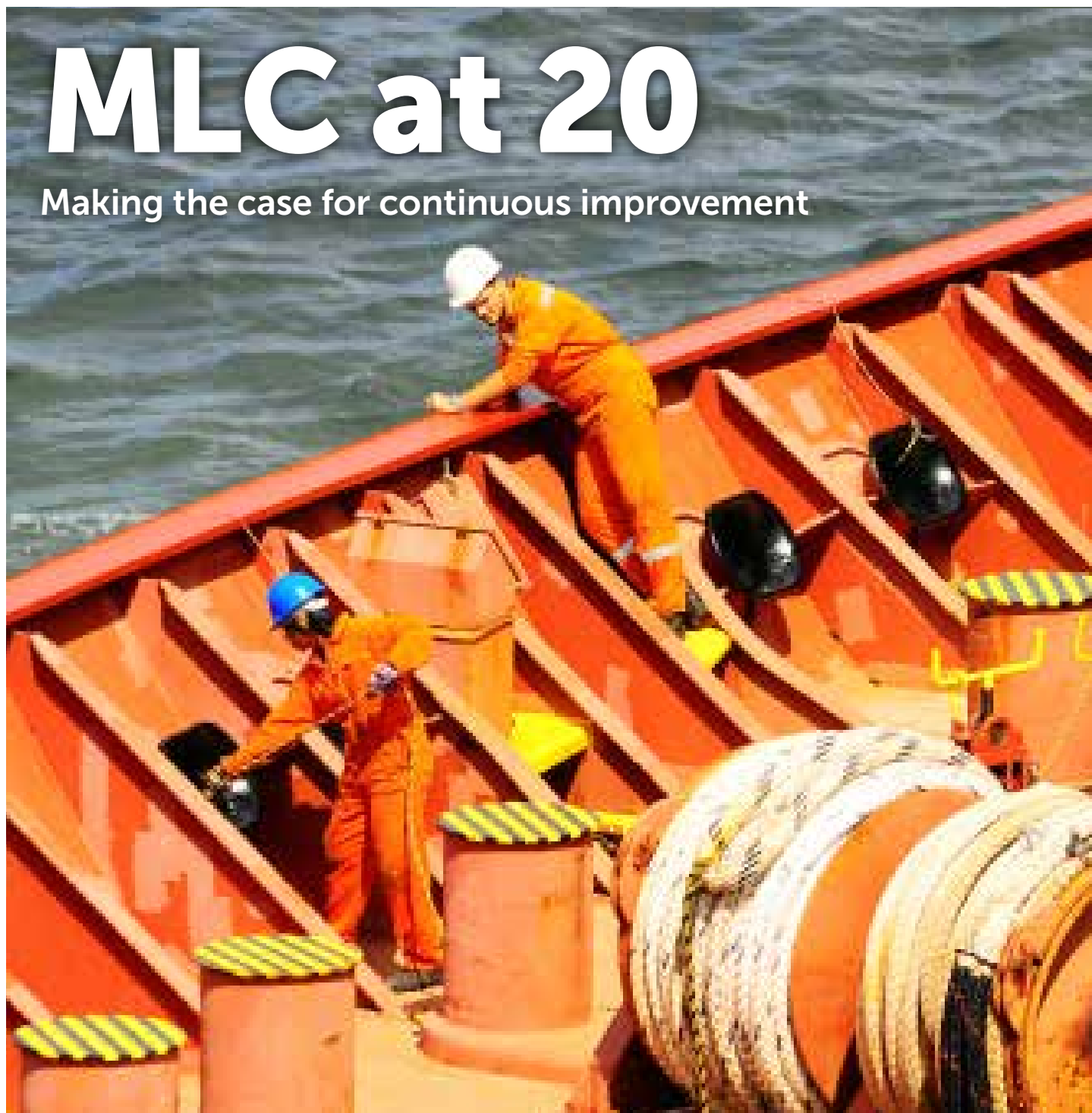
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Wherever you are, so are we

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Chaplain at the Port of Rotterdam with the Protestant Church of the Netherlands, working closely with the Dutch Seafarers' Federation (NZC) and trade unions

Front cover credit:
Danny Cornelissen

OPINION

Making your voice heard at the G7



Nautilus Federation coordinator
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Enshrining workers' rights in the global economic model is an important part of how we can build a better future for seafarers, writes Nautilus Federation coordinator **Danny McGowan**

Global cooperation can often feel remote from the day-to-day realities of working people. But decisions taken at the highest levels – including by the G7 group of the world's most powerful countries – have a direct and lasting impact on jobs, wages and rights across the maritime sector and beyond.

That's why engagement through the Labour 7 (L7) matters. L7 is the official engagement group representing trade unions to the G7. It ensures that the voices of workers are not just heard, but actively shape the international agenda.

As trade unions, we have a responsibility to make our influence count – to help build a global economy that places workers, democracy, and the planet at its centre.

The UK's Trades Union Congress (TUC) federation has been playing its part by attending the L7 summit in Paris on 5 May, where international trade unions met with each other and with representatives of G7 governments, including French ministers, and progressive French academia.

In a statement issued ahead of the

meeting, L7 spoke directly to challenges our members recognise all too well. For too long, the global trading system has placed downward pressure on wages and working conditions, creating a race to the bottom that benefits neither workers nor sustainable economic growth.

Trade imbalances are not abstract economic concepts. They are rooted in

Central to this is the role of collective bargaining. Where workers have a genuine voice, outcomes are better, not just for individuals but for entire economies. Strong collective bargaining agreements help drive up standards, reduce inequality, and create more stable and resilient industries. The L7 is therefore urging the G7 to work towards the adoption

When countries rely on low labour costs, it undermines standards everywhere

decisions that suppress wages, weaken collective bargaining, and prioritise competitiveness over fairness. When countries rely on low labour costs to maintain an edge, it undermines standards everywhere – including the UK, Netherlands and Switzerland.

The L7 is clear: this model must change. A fair and sustainable trade system must be built on decent work, strong labour protections, and respect for fundamental rights. That means ensuring that wages keep pace with productivity, strengthening labour market institutions, and tackling the spread of insecure and non-standard forms of work.

of an action plan on trade and decent jobs to promote a new, fair and sustainable trade model.

This aligns with what we see across the maritime sector. Fair competition depends on a level playing field. Without it, responsible operators and properly protected seafarers are undercut by those companies willing to exploit gaps in regulation. As Nautilus International, and in partnership with our sister unions in the Nautilus Federation and beyond, we will continue working to push that message forward – and to ensure that workers' voices are heard by global economic decision makers.

ITF Seafarers' Trust celebrates 20-year MLC anniversary with funding to promote seafarers' rights in the Arab World

The ITF Seafarers' Trust (ITFST) is announcing new project funding of EUR 500,000 to the International Labour Organisation on the 20-year anniversary of the adoption of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 (MLC). The donation will support institutional capacity building to enhance protection of seafarers' rights in the Arab World.

This latest grant to the Organisation comes on top of funding the current 3-year project with the ILO and the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC-ILO) to improve implementation and enforcement of the MLC, focusing on the regional Memoranda of Understanding of port state control. After completing the first year in the Mediterranean region, the project is now on its second year with a focus on the Indian Ocean. Year three will concentrate on the Viña del Mar region. The Trust is also supporting the ITC-ILO's open courses at the MLC Academy.

The MLC is recognised as an extraordinarily successful international convention, with unique mechanisms balancing the interests and concerns of all tripartite stakeholders. This approach resulted in early ratifications of the Convention by all major flag states and, to date, 112 ratifications covering



Katie Higginbottom,
Head of the ITFST

CREDIT: ITFST

96.6% of the world shipping fleet.

Whilst the Convention was initially billed as a seafarers' bill of rights, it is now more likely to be regarded as a set of minimum standards, reflecting the challenges of a global and multi-faceted industry. However, its strength lies in the framework it provides for essential tripartite negotiations at both national and international level. This new funding will allow the ILO to provide targeted support and development to states in this key region to increase the reach and impact of the MLC.

David Heindel, chair of the ITFST said: 'As a consolidated convention that updated many earlier outmoded conventions, the MLC is designed for continuous improvement.

This is a virtue but can be a challenge for countries juggling multiple priorities and demands. We consider it vital that the ILO is resourced to share its expertise and respond to requests from states in need of technical support.'

Katie Higginbottom, head of the ITFST said: 'We are delighted to be able to facilitate this important work. In a global industry with an international labour market, seafarers are particularly exposed and in need of internationally agreed protections. We are pleased to recognise the excellent work of the ILO secretariat who are continuing the mission of the original architects of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, whose passion and commitment got it off to such a good start.'



(L-R) Nautilus general secretary Sascha Meijer, MM&P international president Captain Don Josberger, Nautilus Federation director Mark Dickinson, and MM&P international secretary-treasurer Lars Turner.

Nautilus strengthens ties with US sister union at MM&P convention

Nautilus officials attended the 91st Convention of the International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P) in the United States, reaffirming the close relationship between affiliate unions of the Nautilus Federation.

Nautilus International general secretary Sascha Meijer and Nautilus Federation director Mark Dickinson attended the convention in Maryland from 3-5 August 2026 at the invitation of MM&P international president Don Josberger and international secretary-treasurer Lars Turner.

Speaking after the event, Ms Meijer said the convention had provided valuable insight into the challenges facing US shipping and maritime trade unionism.

"We met many members and leaders of our sister union and learned a lot about the challenges of US shipping and

of current US maritime trade unionism," she said.

Ms Meijer highlighted concerns over continued waivers to the Jones Act, describing the issue as a significant challenge for American seafarers. "We offered solidarity, knowing that some of Nautilus's aspirations in the UK and Europe are inspired by this Act," she added.

During the convention, Mr Dickinson delivered a speech on the challenges facing maritime professionals and trade unions worldwide, addressing the issues of "sea blindness", fragmentation in shipping, flags of convenience and the growth of shadow fleets and scam ship registers.

Despite these concerns, he struck an optimistic note, arguing that maritime policy is increasingly being recognised as a matter of economic security, industrial policy and national resilience.

"Maritime policy is moving from being a narrow concern of specialists like us in the maritime trade unions to becoming a mainstream issue and a central question of economic security, industrial policy and national resilience, said Mr Dickinson.

"Nowhere is this shift more visible than right here in the United States," he added, pointing to the United States' Maritime Action Plan and legislative measures already being introduced. He added adding that maritime capability is once again also being viewed as a strategic asset, both in the UK and across Europe as a whole.

The convention also featured guest speakers including congresswoman Sarah Elfreth and Association of Flight Attendants-CWA International president Sara Nelson.



CREDIT: Norled

Artist's impression of Norled's battery-swapping facility

Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers backs battery swapping

Nautilus Federation affiliate the Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers says it is positive about first-of-its-kind battery-swapping technology coming in on a fast ferry route in Norway.

Ferry company Norled says a shore-based robot will be used on the fast ferries MS Baronen and MS Baronessen operating in the fjord between Nesoddtangen and Lysaker,

a voyage of eight minutes, enabling the electrically propelled ferries to maintain tight sailing schedules.

The system means a vessel's battery can be swapped in minutes for a replacement while the vessel is in port, and charge on land while the ship is in operation.

Anders Gjestad of the Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers said: "This is

significant for our members as a system like this will require skill and monitoring during the voyage. The battery packs are part of the vessels' propulsion engines and so come under engineers' area of responsibility.

"We're positive about new technology as long as onboard safety is sorted. We do not see this as a threat."

2025's Merchant Navy health trends revealed

Musculoskeletal and psychological health issues are among the most rapidly rising conditions reported by seafarers using telemedicine, while dental problems remain a stubborn and persistent challenge at sea, according to the latest ITF Seafarers' Trust collaborative report.

The 2025 Telemedical Maritime Assistance Services (TMAS) report, which draws on over 18,000 cases from nine national providers, reveals that requests for help with muscle and joint pain have surged by 31% in just one year, and psychological cases – though still a small proportion – have more than tripled. Meanwhile, dental complaints continue to account for a significant share of medical calls, especially among international crews, highlighting a chronic gap in onboard care and prevention.

The top four reasons for contacting TMAS are digestive (including dental) issues, followed by musculoskeletal problems, general/unspecified complaints and skin conditions. These four categories account for over 64% of all cases. Eye, respiratory, and cardiovascular issues follow, while psychological cases – though still a small share (1.1%) – have surged, highlighting growing awareness of mental health at sea.

Up to 60% of cases were resolved with treatment onboard, thanks to TMAS guidance, while 33% required treatment ashore, and 7% resulted in urgent disembarkation (medevac). The UK stands out, with urgent disembarkation being the most common advice (46% of cases), reflecting a different risk threshold or case mix.



CREDIT: Tara Winstead/Pexels

Sustainability, mental health, and demanding better for seafarers

Second officer Cassie Mead has spent over 20 years in the maritime industry, working her way up through the ranks across multiple vessels and employers. In this candid conversation from our Off Course podcast, she tells **Helen Kelly** why proper crewing levels are key to sustainability, her journey with an ADHD diagnosis, and how Gen Z seafarers are forcing the industry to change

When asked about sustainability in shipping, second officer Cassie Mead cuts straight to the heart of the matter: crew numbers.

'More crew. Just don't understaff us,' she says firmly. 'It's a tough job and it's all good to say "if you can't hack it, get out". But sustained fatigue leads to things like heart disease, liver disease, early onset dementia. These are not talked about.'

The New Zealand-born seafarer's career has taken her from Swire Shipping to Celebrity Cruises and Holcim, giving her a comprehensive view of how different sectors approach crewing. What she's observed is troubling: most companies stick to minimum manning requirements rather than investing in adequate crewing.

'I do find that it's more common that people stick to the minimum manning because at the end of the day, it's bottom dollar, unfortunately,' she says. 'Just by having a few more crew, you literally make everybody's lives a little bit easier.'

'Just two more crew members could transform working conditions onboard, allowing for proper rest periods, safer operations, and sustainable work patterns. Yet the industry continues to prioritise short-term cost savings over long-term crew welfare and safety.'

BEYOND CARBON: WHAT SUSTAINABILITY REALLY MEANS AT SEA

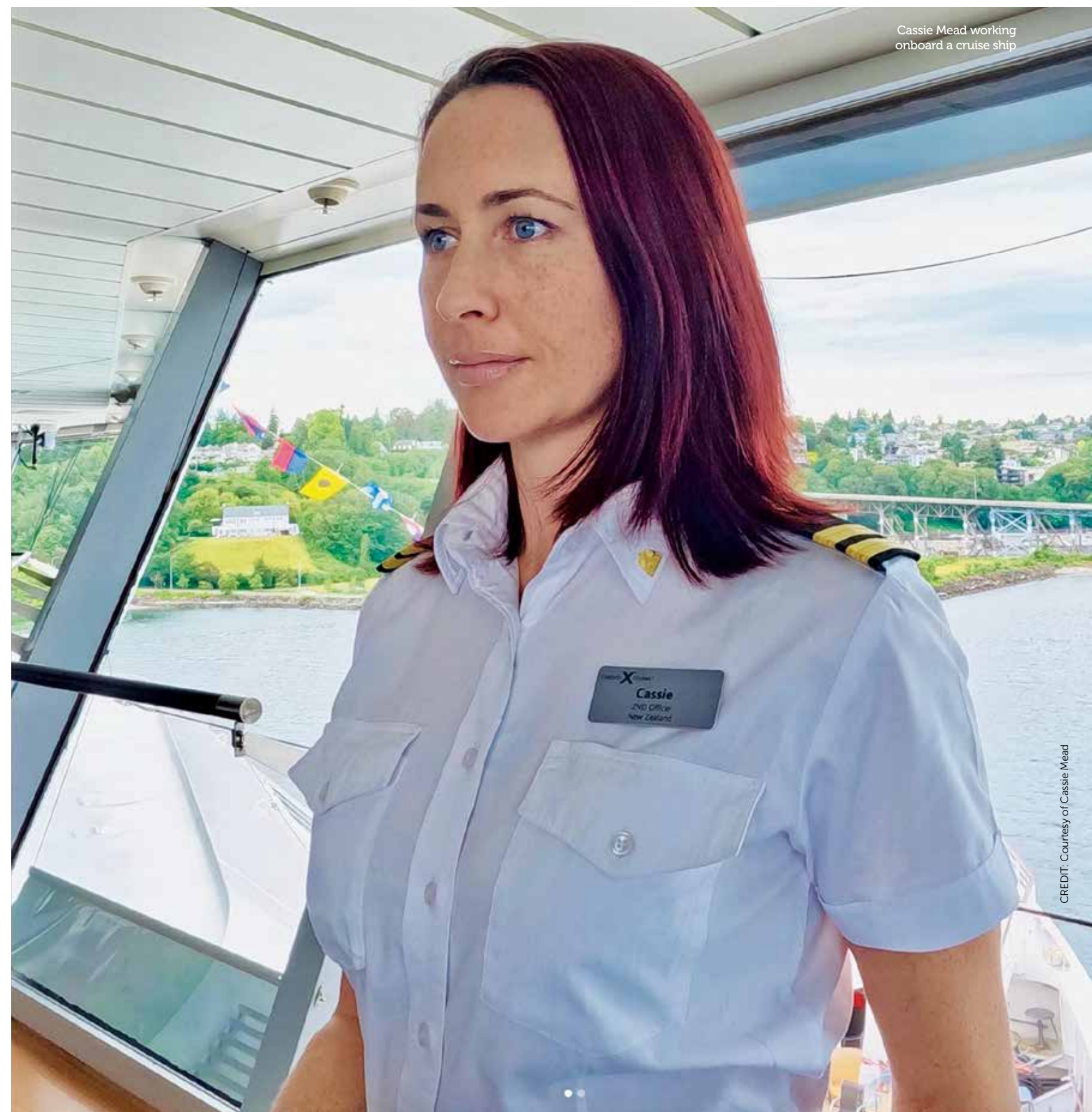
Whilst acknowledging the importance of environmental regulations and technologies like scrubbers and cleaner fuels, Ms Mead argues that sustainability conversations often miss a crucial element: the sustainability of the workforce itself.

She draws a direct line between adequate crewing and operational safety. The current system, she argues, creates an impossible situation. Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) regulations are treated as guidelines rather than rules, with crew regularly exceeding safe working hours to demonstrate commitment or learn additional skills.

'The MLC has been more of a guideline than a rule for many,' she says. 'The number of breaches that come into it purely just because you're trying to be seen as a good employee or trying to go out of your way to learn something different. You've got to go outside your regular hours and use some of your free time to be learning an extra skill.'

GEN Z ARE DEMANDING CHANGE

Ms Mead sees hope in the next generation of seafarers, who are refusing to accept the



Cassie Mead working onboard a cruise ship

CREDIT: Courtesy of Cassie Mead

unsustainable working conditions that previous generations endured.

NAVIGATING SUSTAINABILITY

'This Gen Z is going: "Hell no. I don't want four-month contracts. I don't want time on, half off. I want two on, two off." They want time and time,' she explains. 'There's a lot more boundaries with them and a lot more self-respect and preservation around their rest time and their quality of life.'

The maritime industry's notorious culture – where crew are expected to work excessive hours, skip breaks, and demonstrate constant enthusiasm – is being challenged.

'We didn't read our contracts. We didn't put our foot down about contracted hours,' Ms Mead reflects on her own generation's approach. 'From cadets, we did what we were told, we went everywhere, we overworked, we put in the effort.'

But Gen Z aren't willing to make those same sacrifices. Ms Mead believes they'll either leave the industry or force it to change: 'I think you'll find that they probably don't stick around in the industry for very long or they will force the industry to change and catch up with them.'

She's hopeful it will be the latter: 'They're the generation to really bring in the enforcement about neurodivergence and mental health. They're not embarrassed about mental health like the rest of us have been. They're going to bring about change from a management level.'

ADHD AT SEA

Ms Mead was diagnosed with ADHD two years ago, at a point when she was already deep into her seagoing career. The diagnosis came during a period of severe burnout.

'It was challenging. I always felt like I had two parts of my brain or two sides to my personality,' she explains. 'I would recognise repetitive traits that I couldn't seem to get control of no matter how hard I tried.'

The diagnosis brought clarity but also pain: 'It's grieving over a life that could have been. How much different could my life have been and how much easier could my time at maritime school have been if I had been medicated and educated on my condition?'

The maritime environment presented challenges for someone with ADHD. Sleep deprivation is already a symptom of the condition, and the addition of four-on, eight-



'Just two more crew members could transform working conditions onboard, allowing for proper rest periods, safer operations, and sustainable work patterns'

off watch patterns created an unsustainable situation.

'Sleep deprivation is one of the symptoms of ADHD and then you put midnight to four watches and things on top of that. I've spent years not sleeping essentially, so go figure... you get burnout and you can't emotionally regulate properly when you're so fatigued,' Ms Mead says.

THE STIGMA OF DISCLOSURE

Despite eventually going public about her diagnosis, Ms Mead never disclosed it to her employer at the time. The reason was simple: fear.

'There were some other challenges I had with them, and it was already apparent to me that despite having women in management roles that were ex-seafarers, they were quite old school themselves and their mentality,' she explains. 'I didn't feel like bringing it up with them was going to lead to me having support. I felt like it was going to be my detriment, that it would be ammunition to use against me.'

She witnessed this attitude firsthand when working with a cadet who also had ADHD. The captain remarked that the cadet was 'getting into a habit of using it as an excuse'.

'That's so hard because it probably does come across as an excuse rather than an explanation,' Ms Mead says. 'We're trying to explain why we just said that or why we just did that and we're

apologising for our condition, which is insane.'

She praises organisations like NeurodiversAtSea in the UK for fighting for funding and policies: 'I hope it reaches the wider maritime community.'

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

After experiencing severe burnout and imposter syndrome, Cassie took most of 2025 off from sea, spending time on a major home renovation project that drew on her degree in architecture. She also worked with a therapist and life coach to better understand herself and develop new coping strategies.

'ADHD burnout is even worse than regular burnout,' she explains. 'I got to a point where I just had to stop.'

The break allowed her to reassess her relationship with the industry. For someone who had always identified as a 'lifer', questioning whether to continue as a seafarer was profound.

'I never thought I'd ever reach that point. I had wanted to go to sea since I was 17 and that was it,' she says. But burnout forced a reckoning: 'There were more and more things I was starting to dislike about the industry and how little had changed in the time I'd been at sea.'

A breakthrough came unexpectedly: 'I had just this epiphany moment one day when I was on my way up the driveway and I went, "I'm a mariner". That's what I do. That's me. I'm a mariner.'

She returned to Holcim Cement for three short contracts, working on her favourite vessel with her favourite crew. The experience was carefully managed to support her recovery, with the ship laid up for much of the time and crew working day shifts with normal sleep patterns.

The process has brought her to a healthier mindset: 'I'm at a place now where I would be happy to go back to sea, but I would also be happy to move on to something else. I feel like that's a good place to be, that it means I've reached a point where my whole being isn't tied up in maritime anymore.'

AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S VOICES THROUGH PODCASTING

Alongside her seagoing career, Ms Mead hosts the Women at the Helm podcast, which she launched during mandatory quarantine when returning to cruising post-Covid.

'I believe women can do anything, and I

have done my whole life, and really wanted to emphasise what we do at sea,' she says.

The podcast has a clear mission: to show the reality of women's experiences in maritime, not just the Instagram-worthy moments.

'I wanted it to be about the nitty gritty. I wanted it to be about the side of the industry that you don't hear about. The premise of it is share your truth,' Ms Mead says.

Rather than discouraging women from entering the industry, the podcast aims to prepare them: 'Not to scare anybody off, but more so to arm the next generation, to help provide some information, to let them know that they're not alone out there.'

With women comprising only around 2% of the global maritime workforce, retention is as important as recruitment. Ms Mead has observed that women tend to leave the industry sooner than men.

'That 2% is not increasing because the women are coming in, but they're also leaving as well,' she notes. 'Whether it's because they want to be mothers or because they're over the long stints at sea or the years of sleepless nights, or whether they just feel they've done their time and they progress shore side.'

Support systems remain inadequate in many companies. Whilst some organisations like the Masters, Mates & Pilots union in America negotiate progressive policies including paid shipping of breast milk home, these remain the exception rather than the rule.

'Women's issues have been swept under the rug for so long,' Ms Mead argues. 'It's been "if you can't hack it, get out".'

DESIGN FOR THE FUTURE

When asked about changes needed for a sustainable maritime future, Ms Mead returns to long-term thinking.

'We need to be looking further into the future, not for the near future. Lithium batteries, for example, are a short-term, near future solution. Somebody came up with this idea, it sounded wonderful, and then nobody's thought about the repercussions.'

She advocates for more education about environmental impacts amongst seafarers: 'There needs to be more education around the environmental effects we have on the ocean and marine life and how changes to shipping and vessels can positively impact that in future.'



Watch the podcast episode featuring Cassie Mead on NautilusTV at www.youtube.com/@nautilusint

You can also listen to this episode of Off Course wherever you get your podcasts.

CREDIT: MAIB



The Bahamas-flagged Polesie (top) and the Isle of Man-flagged Verity, onboard which five of seven crew died

Poor watchkeeping blamed for fatal collision

Inadequate watchkeeping and ineffective collision avoidance manoeuvres led to a fatal North Sea collision between the bulk carrier Polesie and the general cargo ship Verity, a UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) report has found.

Five of the seven Verity crew died after the Isle of Man-flagged general cargo carrier sank rapidly following the collision in the German Bight on 24 October 2023.

Before the collision, the Bahamas-flagged bulk carrier

Polesie was heading westbound from Hamburg to Spain in the traffic separation scheme and Verity was heading northbound from Bremen to Immingham in the UK 'such that a risk of collision existed', according to the report.

MAIB investigators concluded that both vessels accepted unsafe passing distances and failed to take early, positive, and clearly identifiable action as required under the amended International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (also referred to as the

COLREGs). The MAIB added that earlier use of VHF radio could also have helped resolve the situation.

The report criticised a late and ineffective intervention by German Bight Vessel Traffic Services (VTS), noting that the guidance provided was unlikely to influence events at that stage. It also noted that 'restrictions on interviewing key witnesses limited the investigation's ability to explore the rationale behind the actions taken by Polesie's watchkeeper and the decisions and actions taken by the staff at German Bight vessel traffic services'.

Verity sustained catastrophic structural damage in the collision and sank quickly, leaving the crew with no opportunity to don lifejackets or immersion suits before abandoning the vessel. The investigation was conducted by the MAIB on behalf of the Isle of Man administration in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding between the MAIB and the Red Ensign Group Category 1 registries of Isle of Man, Cayman Islands, Bermuda and Gibraltar. The right under German law of some witnesses to remain silent was respected.

Chief inspector of marine accidents Andrew Moll said the tragedy was 'wholly avoidable', noting that neither vessel followed collision prevention regulations or maintained safe passing distances. He stressed the need for early, clear action from give-way vessels, timely and appropriate VTS intervention, and correct use of VHF to clarify intentions.

MAIB probe finds safety lessons after Spirit of Discovery propulsion loss



CREDIT: MAIB

The Spirit of Discovery

The UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) has identified 'clear lessons' on vessel safety, crew decision making

and onboard medical responses after its investigation found that violent ship motion in heavy weather led to a propulsion failure on the UK-flagged Saga Cruises vessel Spirit of Discovery.

The 2023 accident injured more than 100 passengers onboard Spirit of Discovery and ultimately resulted in one fatality.

MAIB's report found that shortly after 12:30 on 4 November 2023, the vessel lost propulsion while crossing the Bay of Biscay in severe weather conditions. Investigators determined that violent rolling and pitching caused the ship's propellers to emerge from the water, resulting in overspeed and the automatic shutdown of the propulsion system.

According to the MAIB, the situation was compounded when both propulsion pods unexpectedly 'parked' at 90





degrees to the vessel's heading, significantly reducing the crew's ability to control the ship during the heavy seas. As the vessel rolled violently, passengers were thrown about onboard, leading to more than 100 injuries.

Eight passengers who were seriously hurt were taken directly to hospital when the ship reached port. One of those passengers later died from injuries sustained during the incident.

Investigators also highlighted operational decision-making

a spinal injury resulted in that individual receiving suboptimal treatment.

Safety recommendations have been issued to the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency to consider international carriage requirements for electronic inclinometers, while classification societies have been urged to improve the quality of propulsion system instruction manuals.

The propulsion manufacturer has also been advised to issue guidance to operators of vessels fitted with similar pod systems, and the Cruise

The decision to cross the Bay of Biscay in the forecast conditions was not effectively challenged by the crew

issues. MAIB found that the decision to cross the Bay of Biscay in the forecast conditions was not effectively challenged by either the vessel's crew or operational teams ashore.

The investigation further identified shortcomings in the onboard emergency response. The ship's mass casualty incident plan was not fully implemented, which contributed to the medical team becoming overstretched while treating injured passengers. In addition, a delay in recognising that a passenger had suffered

Lines International Association has been urged to review medical staffing levels and heavy-weather furniture securing policies.

Spirit of Discovery's owner, manager, medical services provider, propulsion manufacturer and shipyard have also taken significant action to address the safety issues identified by this investigation.

MAIB chief inspector Rob Loder said the accident involved a complex sequence of events but offered 'clear lessons' for the cruise sector to help prevent a similar tragedy.



Warning over 'normalised' towline failures after crew injured on tug Svitzer Avon

Two crew on board the UK-registered tug Svitzer Avon sustained minor injuries after a towline parted under load during a ship assist operation involving the car carrier Auto Eco at Royal Portbury Dock, Bristol, on 4 February 2025.

Svitzer Avon and Svitzer Brunel had exited the lock shortly before 20:00hrs to meet the inbound vessel. With a pilot on board Auto Eco, both tugs were engaged for the approach and lock entry. A pre-manoeuve arrangement placed Svitzer Avon's mate at the controls under the supervision of a relief master who, while type-qualified, had limited experience on that specific vessel.

By 20.03, Svitzer Avon was secured astern of the carrier via a towline assembly led through the forward staple and held on the winch brake without engaging the render-recover system. Shortly after, the pilot instructed the tug Svitzer Brunel to standby on the port bow, followed shortly

afterwards by the instruction '25% straight back' to Svitzer Avon. During the vessel's turn to align with the lock, Svitzer Avon experienced a significant shear and heel following an overcorrection in handling. The towline failed under the resulting peak load.

The recoiling rope struck the wheelhouse, shattering forward and stern glazing. Flying glass caused minor injuries to both the master and mate. The crew subsequently changed to Svitzer Brunel to complete the berthing safely before returning for medical attention.

Findings and conclusions
Investigators found that the relief master was not authorised to supervise the manoeuvre and that the company's training regime lacked clarity and oversight. The tow rope had a previous failure history and parted again after 307 further tasks due to excessive dynamic loading, not material defect. The operator's reliance on visual inspection and rotation of

ropes fell short of best practice, with no residual strength testing conducted. Although glazing met required standards, risks associated with snapback remain significant. The MAIB investigated a similar accident involving Svitzer Mercurius in 2019. The chief inspector of marine accidents has expressed concern that towline failures may be becoming normalised, urging Svitzer Marine Limited to strengthen measures to prevent failures and mitigate crew injury risks, including revisiting earlier safety recommendations on wheelhouse protection.

Svitzer has acknowledged the findings and taken steps to address them, including formalising trainer roles, introducing a structured type-rating framework, reviewing rope failure incidents, and aligning rope selection with operational risk. However, the MAIB stressed that further action is required, particularly on towline management and snapback mitigation.

The MLC at 20: still delivering

In the landmark treaty's anniversary year, the Nautilus Federation has launched a new report into the continuing impact and future of the Maritime Labour Convention. **Rob Coston** reports

Twenty years after the adoption of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC), the treaty remains one of the most significant achievements in protecting the rights of workers around the world. Described as the fourth pillar of international maritime regulation alongside the key IMO conventions on safety, training and pollution prevention, the MLC has transformed minimum standards for living and working at sea while helping to create fairer competition across the global shipping industry.

Adopted on 23 February 2006 following years of negotiations between governments, shipowners and seafarers' organisations, the Convention brought together more than 60 existing International Labour Organization (ILO) maritime instruments into a single, comprehensive framework. It established, for the first time, an internationally enforceable baseline covering almost every aspect of a seafarer's working life, from recruitment and employment conditions to accommodation, medical care, welfare, repatriation and social protection. Since entering into force in August 2013, the Convention has been ratified by more than 100 countries, covering the vast majority of the world's merchant fleet.

For Nautilus Federation affiliates, the Convention represented a major



CREDIT: ILO

milestone, with many of us playing a part in its creation. By establishing minimum rights that apply regardless of nationality, it has helped combat the exploitation of seafarers and reduce the incentives for unscrupulous operators to cut costs through poor employment practices.

THE REPORT

The Nautilus Federation report focuses on how the instrument can play its part in the future of seafarer rights and welfare.

Over the past two decades, the MLC has continued to evolve. As a "living instrument", it is designed to respond to changes in the industry through amendments agreed by the Special Tripartite Committee, where governments, employers



CREDIT: Nautilus International

and seafarers' representatives work together to update the Convention.

In his introduction, Nautilus Federation director Mark Dickinson says that "Continuous improvement of the Convention is not just a necessity to protect those whose work underpins the global economy but a moral obligation to reward those who, as key workers, keep global supply chains moving."

Indeed, much remains to be improved. The report highlights fatigue, inadequate hours of work and rest, insufficient crewing levels, accommodation standards, criminalisation of seafarers, access to shore leave, social connectivity, fair pay, social security and retirement provision as priorities. It warns that recruitment and retention problems will persist for the industry unless these underlying issues experienced by seafarers are tackled.

The most urgent reform is identified as strengthening protections around working and rest hours to combat fatigue. A further urgent change will be ensuring a Just Transition as shipping decarbonises, something that is a strategic priority for Nautilus. This means ensuring seafarers have access to training, upskilling and reskilling without bearing the financial cost themselves, ensuring they are not left behind as the industry evolves.

In addition, although 112 countries have ratified the MLC – covering more than 96% of the global fleet by gross tonnage – gaps in ratification and inconsistent enforcement continue to leave many seafarers vulnerable to exploitation, as demonstrated during the Covid-19 crew change crisis. The report supports ongoing efforts to secure wider ratification and stronger enforcement.

THE PATH TO IMPROVEMENT

For Nautilus Federation affiliates and other maritime unions, the Convention remains an essential foundation rather than a finished project. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on governments enforcing its provisions, responsible employers maintaining high standards, and seafarers having the confidence and support to exercise their rights.

Research by Seafarers' Rights International estimates that the Convention is only around 65% effective globally and calls for stronger international oversight, greater transparency, improved accountability for flag and port states, and better access to justice for seafarers.

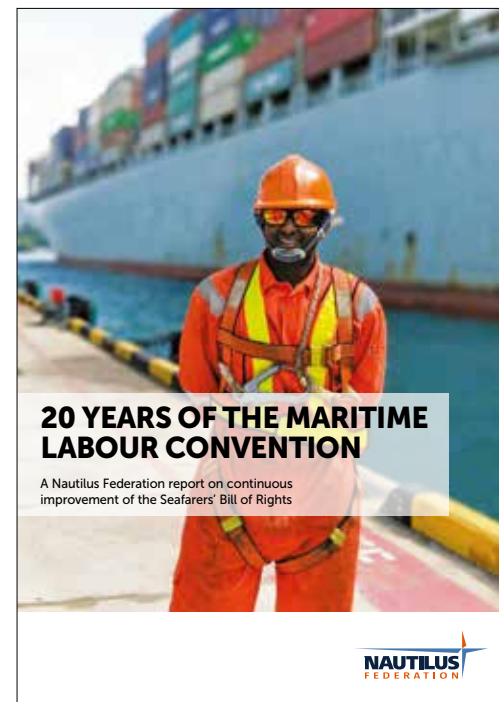
The report indicated that a major concern is the emergence of a two-tier system, with some countries rigorously enforcing the



» MLC while others lack the capacity or political will to do so. This creates opportunities for substandard operators to exploit regulatory gaps, particularly through flags of convenience, undermining seafarers' rights and placing responsible shipowners at a competitive disadvantage.

To combat this, the report argues that the Convention should be reconsolidated to incorporate all agreed amendments into a single updated treaty with strengthened enforcement mechanisms. This would simplify oversight, create greater clarity for the industry, reinforce a level playing field, and expose states or shipowners that fail to meet internationally agreed standards.

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in coordination between flag, port and labour-supplying states, leaving thousands of seafarers stranded and unable to exercise basic rights. Although



“Continuous improvement of the MLC is a moral obligation to those who, as key workers, keep global supply chains moving.”

Nautilus Federation director Mark Dickinson

amendments have been put into the MLC in response, these reforms will only succeed with stronger international cooperation.

The report also raises concerns about the MLC's amendment procedure. As some states delay or refuse to accept amendments, the report argues that the Convention risks becoming fragmented, with different labour standards applying under different flags. This could weaken global protections, increase legal uncertainty and erode the level playing field that the MLC was designed to create.

The report concludes that governments, employers and seafarers' organisations must work together to strengthen the Convention, close enforcement gaps and ensure consistent global

standards – and it lays out specific tasks for each of the three groups to work on. The MLC must remain a living instrument that evolves to meet new challenges, while governments must show greater political commitment to ensuring seafarers receive the rights, protections and recognition they deserve.

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You can download the Nautilus Federation report **20 Years of the Maritime Labour Convention** free of charge from the News and resources section of www.nautilusfederation.org

IMO Legal Committee to tackle criminalisation



Director of legal services
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The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has renewed its focus on protecting seafarers following another record year for abandonment cases and growing concern over the criminalisation of crews caught up in organised crime and regional conflicts.

Abandonment on the rise

Meeting for its 113th session from 13-17 April 2026, the IMO Legal Committee heard that 409 new seafarer abandonment cases were reported during 2025, affecting 6,264 seafarers on 364 vessels – the highest annual total ever recorded. In 185 cases, ships did not have the mandatory financial security required under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC).

With a further 103 cases already recorded during the first quarter of 2026, delegates warned that this year's figures are on course to exceed the previous record.

The Committee also expressed concern about vessels operating under fraudulent or unknown flags and the increasing number sailing without valid financial security certificates. It agreed to ask the Joint ILO/IMO Tripartite Working Group to develop a standard operating procedure for responding to abandonment cases, including clear timelines for intervention, while improvements to the joint ILO/IMO database will help verify financial security documentation more effectively.

Further work will also continue on tackling fraudulent ship registration and unlawful shipping operations involving substandard vessels.

Fair treatment

Protecting seafarers facing detention was another major theme. Considering a joint submission from the International Transport Workers' Federation and the International Chamber of Shipping, the Committee supported wider implementation of the 2024 IMO/ILO

Guidelines on the fair treatment of seafarers detained in connection with alleged crimes. Delegates also backed improved cooperation between flag, port and seafarer nationality states, together with additional training for prosecutors, police, immigration authorities and maritime administrations.

This discussion was prompted, in part, by the growing threat posed by transnational organised crime, noting that criminal groups are increasingly placing illicit cargo onboard vessels without the knowledge of crews, exposing innocent seafarers to arrest and prosecution. An intersessional correspondence group will now examine measures to strengthen legal protections and improve international cooperation.

The Committee also welcomed the milestone ratification of the 2010 Hazardous and Noxious Substances Protocol, which is expected to enter into force in November 2027, establishing a stronger international compensation regime for damage involving hazardous and noxious substances carried by sea.

For Nautilus members, the discussions reflect growing international recognition that stronger legal protections, better enforcement and closer cooperation between governments are essential to safeguarding seafarers' rights and welfare in an increasingly complex operating environment.

Nautilus director of legal services Charles Boyle commented: “The IMO Legal Committee continues to oversee a wide range of issues that are relevant to our members, and some of its work is done in collaboration with the International Labour Organization. The increasing numbers of seafarer abandonment cases are alarming, particularly in view of the many cases of non-compliance with MLC financial security measures. It is hoped that these UN agencies can work together to improve this situation as a matter of urgency.”

OPINION

Regulating autonomous vessels: an update



Head of professional and technical
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July this year saw the adoption of the International Code of Safety for Marine Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS Code) – an important milestone in the development of autonomous shipping. While the technology has been evolving for several years, this is the first internationally-agreed framework that provides a common approach to regulating its safe use.

What do we mean by “autonomous vessels”?

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) uses the term MASS to describe a broad range of technologies. At one end of the spectrum are remotely controlled or fully autonomous vessels with no crew onboard. At the other are conventionally crewed ships that

incorporate autonomous systems to perform tasks that previously required direct human intervention. These could include automated machinery management, dynamic positioning, and other onboard systems that enhance, rather than replace, the crew.

Why do these vessels need new international regulations?

As autonomous technology becomes more common, it has become increasingly clear that the existing regulatory framework needs to evolve alongside it. International maritime regulations have traditionally been written on the assumption that people are carrying out key operational functions onboard. Once that assumption changes, so too must the rules.

Without an internationally agreed framework, each flag administration would have been left to assess autonomous technologies independently. That would inevitably have led to inconsistencies between administrations, making it more difficult for operators to introduce new technologies and for autonomous vessels to trade internationally.

The new IMO MASS Code is intended to address that challenge by establishing a common baseline for safety. It gives



Watch Sarah Robinson's video interview with David Appleton about autonomous vessels on NautilusTV at www.youtube.com/@nautilusint

CREDIT: Ocean Infinity



UK maritime minister Keir Mather tries out remote-controlled vessel technology on a visit to the Ocean Infinity company in July 2026

flag states a shared framework against which they can assess new technologies, helping to ensure greater consistency while also supporting innovation.

Who does the MASS Code apply to?

It is important to emphasise that the code is currently non-mandatory. Rather than creating legally binding requirements, it provides guidance on how administrations should approach autonomous vessel operations. However, it also sends a clear signal about the direction of travel. Developers, manufacturers and operators can now design systems with a much better understanding of the standards the IMO expects future autonomous vessels to meet.

The code currently applies to SOLAS cargo ships of 500 gross tonnage and above engaged on international voyages. Passenger ships are expected to be considered at a later stage.

One of the strengths of the MASS Code is that it is goal-based rather than prescriptive. Instead of specifying exactly how a particular technology must operate, it sets out the safety outcomes that must be achieved. This gives designers the flexibility to develop innovative solutions while ensuring administrations can assess whether those solutions deliver an equivalent level of safety to conventional ships.

What does the MASS Code cover?

The code addresses all the key aspects of ship operation, including navigation, engineering systems, communications and search and rescue. It also establishes overarching

principles, including the requirement for a clearly identified person to remain responsible for the vessel at all times, even where there are no crew members physically onboard.

In areas where autonomous operations may introduce additional risks, the code also requires appropriate safeguards beyond those expected for conventional ships.

What difference will the code make to our members' work?

For most of our members working on conventional vessels, the immediate impact of the code is likely to be limited. However, the publication of the code is likely to encourage greater investment in autonomous technologies and accelerate the development of new projects across the industry.

Looking further ahead, the non-mandatory code is intended to form the foundation of a mandatory international regime. The IMO plans to begin an experience-building phase, allowing administrations and operators to apply the guidance and identify areas where improvements may be needed before work progresses on a mandatory version.

The current timetable envisages development of the mandatory code beginning in 2028, with adoption targeted for 2030. Whether that proves achievable remains to be seen. Building sufficient operational experience in this relatively short period may be challenging, and many within the industry recognise that the timeline could ultimately be extended.



Artist's impression of a future autonomous container ship, with no smokestack or superstructure

CREDIT: Wikideast/Wikimedia Commons



Still remembered: a commemorative service for the Merchant Navy seafarers lost in the 1912 Titanic disaster was held on 15 April 2026 at the Titanic Engineers' Memorial in Southampton, organised by the Merchant Navy Welfare Board and IMarEST Guild of Benevolence

CREDIT: MINWB

Why we still commemorate the Titanic disaster

Ask the general public today to name a famous shipping disaster and almost without exception the answer one will hear is 'Titanic'. However, as mariners, we don't think of the romanticised version of the vessel from films and novels; we remember the safety regulations that came into force as a direct consequence of the Titanic disaster.

These include the SOLAS Treaty (1914); LSA carriage requirements; improved stability criteria; the Radio Act of 1912 to maintain a continuous listening watch and of course the establishment of the International Ice Patrol (IIP).

As master of Queen Mary 2, Titanic has never been far from my mind during each of the 150-plus trans-Atlantic crossings I have safely completed to date over the past eight years. The daily IPP reports, particularly between April and June, are worth their weight in gold.

Of course, there have sadly been a

number of other maritime disasters since Titanic with even greater horrifying loss of life, including the Senegalese ferry Le Joola in 2002, which took over 1,800 people to the deep, and the deadliest peacetime maritime disaster of all: Dona Paz in the Philippines in 1987, with a dreadful human cost of over 4,300 souls.

These other disasters do not get the attention they deserve, but I believe the perpetual memory of the Titanic tragedy should be commemorated and remain in our consciousness in memoriam for all those lost at sea. The tragic event of 15 April 1912 should be a catalyst for us to never rest on our laurels and remain committed to improving safety so that we do not have to mourn any more colleagues or passengers.

Captain Aseem Hashmi
President of the
British Titanic Society



CREDIT: Jon Purkiss Photography

Pictured above is Falklands veteran Keith Thompson helping to lay a floral tribute at the Falklands Memorial Bench in Pickering Park, Hull. The tribute was part of a ceremony held on 4 April to honour all those who served on the nine Hull Merchant Navy vessels involved in the 1982 Falklands War.

THE MARITIME CHARITY COLUMN



Helene Perfors
Protestant chaplain
Port of Rotterdam

Seafarers welfare: progress, but challenges remain

Every day, seafarers keep global trade moving. But supporting their wellbeing remains a complex and ongoing task. As a chaplain at the Port of Rotterdam with the Protestant Church of the Netherlands, I work closely with the Dutch Seafarers' Federation (NZC) and trade unions to support seafarers' welfare across Dutch ports. Looking back over the last half year, some topics stand out at NZC.

Despite international legal protections, seafarers' welfare is not always fully respected in practice. One persistent problem is shore leave. Access to shore leave, safe transport, and basic welfare services is too often restricted or overlooked.

NZC continues to raise these concerns directly with port facility security officers and port authorities. In the Port of Amsterdam, NZC chaplain Leon Rasser has been working closely with the harbourmaster and port authorities to keep seafarers' rights and needs on the agenda.

Progress is possible – but it requires constant attention and cooperation. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is affecting shipping routes, crew safety, and the wellbeing of seafarers worldwide. Uncertainty, route changes, and security risks have increased pressure on crews.

For families at home, the worry can be even greater. Communication is not always clear, and much information cannot be shared for security reasons. This creates anxiety for those waiting on shore.

Together with the Association of Seafarers'

Partners and Families, NZC offers support to these families. Sometimes this means professional pastoral care; sometimes it simply means being available to listen. Knowing someone understands their fears can make a real difference.

A major positive development is the launch of SEA CARE, a new EU supported initiative aimed at improving mental health support for seafarers after serious onboard incidents. Dutch organisations NZC and SPWO are co initiators of this project, which was officially introduced at the World Maritime University in Malmö. The goal is simple but vital: early support, faster access to care, and preventing long term psychological harm to crew members.

A survey has already been carried out among shipping companies and seafarers in western Europe. The results will help shape future training, awareness, and response procedures – making sure help reaches seafarers when they need it most.

NZC firmly believes that improving seafarers' wellbeing cannot be done alone. Real change comes through cooperation – between welfare organisations, unions, port authorities, shipowners, and mental health professionals.



THE MARITIME CHARITY COLUMN is a regular feature in the Nautilus Telegraph. Submissions are invited from a range of organisations by the Telegraph editor.



GET HELP

Nautilus 24/7
Emergency helpline for members of Nautilus Federation affiliates, wherever they are.
www.nautilusint.org/nautilus247

Sailors' Society Wellness helpline

Fully confidential mental health service available 24/7 to all seafarers and their families.
www.wellnessatsea.org

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