

Three months since the cruise industry shutdown

Mauritian government and cruise companies hold stranded crew for ransom

By Tom Casey
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On Wednesday, Mauritius's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nando Bodha (Mouvement Socialiste Militant/MSM) announced on behalf of Prime Minister Pravid Jugnauth a gradual plan to repatriate Mauritius's approximately 3,500 citizens currently stranded around the world due to travel restrictions implemented by the government in response to the coronavirus. It is estimated that 2,000 of these individuals are employed on cruise liners, spread out across 21 ships which are docked in 82 ports around the world.

As the WSWs has widely reported, cruise ship workers have faced horrific conditions since the industrywide shutdown on March 13 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the prompt evacuation of paying customers in fleet after fleet, hundreds of nations subsequently closed their borders in response to the outbreak of the pandemic, leaving approximately 200,000 ship workers stranded. Caught in the middle of a dispute between cruise corporations and governments over who will foot the bill for their repatriation, thousands of cruise crews have been kept in the dark indefinitely as to when they would be returned home.

While representatives of billion-dollar enterprises, such as Royal Caribbean Cruises, Carnival Corporation and Norwegian Cruise Lines, have spent months deliberating with local authorities over costs of charter travel and quarantine arrangements which amount to a fraction of their profit margins, cruise ship workers remain in limbo, struggling with declining health conditions and sinking into financial destitution.

Reports from crews abound of widespread deteriorating mental health in the face of inconsistent and insubstantial information from their employers and governments on official repatriation arrangements. To add insult to injury, a large portion of these workers, including entire on-board operational departments, have been designated as "nonessential" as their job functions are unnecessary when paying customers are not on board. As such, these employees have been pushed off payrolls, with many now making a fraction, if any at all, of their originally stipulated salaries. A flood of crew members has given accounts to the media of being unable to pay for their

monthly expenses and provide for their families at home.

Since the beginning of May, there have been at least eight non-COVID-related deaths among stranded crews, two of whom occurred only in the past week on Royal Caribbean's Harmony of the Seas and another in the Crystal Cruises fleet. Of the deceased workers, two were reported to have been found hanged in their cabins; two died as a result of going overboard; two more were merely described as having been "found dead," and those remaining had no causes of deaths officially reported. On crew-controlled news sources and social media groups, these deaths have unflinchingly been referred to as suicides.

The Mauritius government's repatriation plan has incurred bitter opposition from crew members of all nationalities, as well as from the families of Mauritian crews who anxiously await their relatives' returns. While Bodha's announcement provides dates and locations for dozens of chartered repatriation flights, as well as details on quarantine procedures for travelers, it evaded addressing the costs of these measures that were mandated by Air Mauritius, the private airline firm which has recently assumed joint control with the government over the task of returning stranded citizens home.

A chilling excerpt from an Aircraft Charter Agreement issued by the airline was circulated in online crew social media groups and was shared with the WSWs by an anonymous stranded ship employee.

The document specifies a "discounted price [...] to be borne by cruise companies" of \$1,300 (US) per individual repatriated, which covers "meals and miscellaneous/ancillaries like tea and coffee" at \$1,000 (US), or roughly \$67 for each day of the 15-day quarantine period, two polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests valued at nearly \$75 (US) each, and approximately \$200 for "support and ancillary services." The excerpt also lists a bullet point, which clarifies the price of one charter flight from London to Port Louis, Mauritius as €215,000.

A parenthetical in the document specifies that in the event that a person tests positive for COVID-19 among larger groups of repatriated citizens, quarantine would be extended for the entire incoming "batch" for an additional seven days, and that "the costs to be borne by the cruise companies will have to be

adjusted on a pro-rata basis to cover for the additional days.”

The big question for these marooned workers, the answer to which is assuredly doubtful, is whether their employers will even agree to the costs demanded by the private-public partnership of their government and Air Mauritius. If the cruise companies fail to comply with these costs, it will be only the latest of several instances in which joint repatriation plans have fallen through and workers have been held captive indefinitely as a result.

In a Wednesday article published by TopFMradio.com, Mauritian parliamentary minority opposition leader Shakeel Mohamed (Labour Party/LP) staged a political charade against Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth (MSM), questioning him as to why the plan, issued far too late with respect to the direness of the situation, had failed to mention its price tag.

“Costs [outlined] would have to be borne by the cruise ships,” Mohamed said, “and I’m wondering why [Hon. Prime Minister Jugnauth] kept that quiet [...] in spite of taking time to answer. And those costs would be to pay for the accommodation package of Mauritian citizens *in* Mauritius that is, [...] according to convention, under the responsibility of the state.” He then toothlessly criticized Jugnauth’s refusal to allow cruise companies to provide their own repatriation flights, implicitly referencing the government’s attempt to manipulate travel and healthcare contracts for Mauritian business interests.

Anyone seriously concerned with the fate of stranded crew members must not accept at face value the empty, inner-parliamentary denunciations of the prime minister’s repatriation plans. While enjoying a position in which they have no electoral basis to mount any serious opposition and likely would not if they did, opposition PMs such as Mohamed and Arvin Boolell have issued measure after measure against the MSM-majority government’s criminal handling of the situation facing the country’s expatriate citizens to little avail.

Despite being Mauritius’s oldest political party, founded on struggles within the working class and the trade unions against British imperialism, the Labour Party’s major political and historical gains have been predicated upon coalitions, blocs and alliances with interest groups and various nationalist and imperialist bourgeois parties and organizations. Workers should take extreme caution in supporting, if they do not already outwardly oppose, all elements of the Mauritian state.

Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Mauritian capitalism had its sights set on increasing the portfolios of its own business class. It is now well understood within the leading circles of the country’s financial elite that the global health crisis will provide the pretext for an expansion of their interests. A June 5 article published by Maurice-Info.mu entitled “Rebuilding Mauritius: The New Future?” gives the following assessment:

“The Budget 2020/21 was billed as the most important budget since [our] independence [in 1968]. It confirms what the

Government has been preaching since COVID-19 hit Mauritius.

“The uncertainties prevailing have shaped up the measures announced in the budget. The support from Mauritius Investment Corporation (MIC) under the aegis of the Bank of Mauritius is critical for the rebuilding of the economy and without the support of the Bank of Mauritius, it would have been difficult to match Income and Expenditure. The development of the Bank of Mauritius (DBM) is also being used to provide concessionary interest rate at 1% to various sectors.

“The Mauritian economy through its key economic pillars was stuttering during the pre-COVID-19 period and the measures announced allow for the reset button to be pressed.”

Cruise ship workers must uncompromisingly reject the callous calculations made between the state agents of capitalism at home—as well as those in all other nations, and especially in the imperialist countries—and their multibillion dollar employers in the cruise corporations. They must form rank-and-file workplace and safety committees on every ship in every fleet in political alliance with working class organs of struggle on land across the globe. These committees must dedicate themselves to upholding the following demands as part of a broader struggle for the realization of a global, socialist economy:

- Safe and immediate repatriation for all stranded crew at no expense to themselves
- Full compensation for all lost wages due to the coronavirus pandemic
- The reinstatement at full pay and/or purging of disciplinary records for all workers terminated or victimized for speaking out against their employers
- Compensation to the families of workers who have died due to COVID-19 or who have suffered from deaths of despair while on cruise ships during the coronavirus pandemic
- Oversight by worker-controlled safety committees for all ship operations upon the resumption of the cruising industry

We urge workers interested in furthering these demands to build a revolutionary party based on the independence of the working class, the program of international socialism and the theory of permanent revolution as outlined by Leon Trotsky. Contact the WSWs for more information on joining the Socialist Equality Party and building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in your country.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>