

As US cruise industry delays operations until November, thousands of seafarers remain stranded

By Tom Casey
11 August 2020

On August 5, the Cruise Line Industry Association (CLIA) announced that it would continue its voluntary suspension of operations in US waters until October 31. This decision marks the third instance of an effective extension of the cruise industry's US hiatus since CLIA initially announced the suspension in conjunction with the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) no-sail order on March 14.

In mid-March, countries around the world began to restrict their borders to international maritime passenger travel. What was initially only a US shutdown quickly became a worldwide pause in the entire industry.

A Friday article in *USAToday* chronicling the most recent CLIA extension estimated that approximately 12,000 cruise workers remain marooned in US waters — a number down from the 70,000 reported in early May, which is a further reduction from the 93,000 reported by the US Coast Guard (USCG) in mid-April. Internationally, there were approximately 100,000 more crewmembers left stranded at the onset of the pandemic and there likely remain thousands worldwide.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has widely reported on the desperate conditions facing cruise workers from dozens of countries who remain stuck on vessels. In what the International Maritime Organization deemed to be a “humanitarian and safety crisis” for seafarers, there have been nearly a hundred onboard COVID-19 outbreaks, well over a dozen disease-related crewmember deaths, and several other employee deaths suspected to have been suicides.

A cruise worker stranded on a ship near the coast of Brazil spoke to the WSWS about the conditions that crew on her ship were facing. The employee, who wished to remain anonymous, has been at sea for five months with no clear plan for repatriation. “It’s absolutely absurd — nobody responsible is willing to put themselves in our shoes. We are tired, and our depression is going to kill us. We have lost our

appetites, and we can’t sleep. Believe me when I say that it’s a really hard time for us.”

Friday’s *USAToday* report repeats the narrative common in tourism and business publications that governmental port and health agencies — not the cruise lines themselves — have been largely to blame for the failure to repatriate tens of thousands of crewmembers. The article quotes CLIA’s Executive Committee Global Chair Adam M Goldstein who states “there are a lot of countries [to which] you would normally take air transportation or [to which] you might find yourself going from home port to home country on ground transportation ... Borders started to be closed, and (crew members) couldn’t access normal routes.”

While the article cites the government of Mauritius and the Philippines as examples of countries whose policies have restricted the repatriation of seafarers, it also cites Goldstein bemoaning the CDC’s restrictive guidelines for travel from within the US. “The industry had faced challenges early on trying to repatriate crew members in the U.S., too... Particularly due to the CDC's stiff requirements for crew's use of commercial air travel,” the report states.

As the WSWS has documented, the government of Mauritius, a small island country in the western Indian Ocean with a population of under 1.3 million, has used the crisis facing seafarers to leverage a boom for its travel economy. In June, Mauritian Foreign Minister Nando Bodha announced a plan by the government, in a voluntary partnership with Air Mauritius Holdings Ltd., its biggest, privately held tourism conglomerate, to repatriate its citizens abroad with an inflated price tag of \$1,300 (US) per individual returned.

Even if it were true that the border policies of governments of small countries like Mauritius and the Philippines have been the main obstacle for multibillion dollar cruise corporations’ safe repatriation of their employees — which is itself a highly questionable assertion — the notion that these companies are hapless middlemen,

caught between seafarers desperate to return home and restrictive governmental agencies, is belied by the fact that the CDC has acted completely at the beck and call of the cruise industry.

The CDC's initial no-sail order was put into effect in the closest collaboration with CLIA, spelling out the agency's complete subservience to the industry. The CDC's initial March 14 order reads, "[o]n March 13... CLIA and their associated members announced that all member cruise lines would voluntarily suspend cruise ship operations from U.S. ... for 30 days." It continues, "[f]ollowing the example set by CLIA members, additional cruise lines have also voluntarily suspended operations from U.S. ports of call. Although CLIA members and the additional cruise lines implementing a voluntary suspension of operations represent a large majority of the cruise industry, not all cruise lines or ships have announced a voluntary suspension of operations or that they will follow the important example set by CLIA members. This Order is intended to cover and specifically apply to those cruise lines or ships that do not undertake a voluntary suspension of operations."

In other words, the CDC's orders only apply to the small minority of cruise vessels whose operators choose not to comply with the CLIA's voluntary industry suspension.

A separate *USAToday* report states that cruise lines, which are members of CLIA, comprise 95 percent of the world's cruise vessels. The association names 28 companies on the list of its global cruise lines. Of these member brands, 20 fall under the ownership of three cruising mega-corporations — Carnival Corp. & plc (CCL), Royal Caribbean Group (RCCL), and Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL).

According to data provided by CruiseMarketWatch.com, brands under the CCL umbrella claimed a total of approximately 40 percent of the \$45.6 billion total 2018 annual revenue of the industry. RCCL and NCL-owned companies claimed approximately 20 percent and 13 percent of this revenue respectively.

CLIA's Global Executive Committee is composed of top former and current cruise line CEOs as well as other high-ranking officers in companies in the hospitality, tourism and entertainment industry. The collective personal net worth of CLIA's Global Executive Committee is well over \$5.5 billion dollars.

On April 9, the CDC issued a notice extending its no-sail order for an additional 100 days, expanding the domain of its directives to "any cruise ship that was previously excluded from the March 14, 2020 Order by virtue of having voluntarily suspended operations." It also specified that all passenger ships in US waters would be required to implement safety procedures to "prevent, mitigate, and respond to the spread of COVID-19 on board cruise ships."

Despite the CDC's seemingly imperative language, however, the April memo explains in no uncertain terms that its "order" did not fall under the category of the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), the legal framework that has historically provided government oversight to private enterprises in the US. The document listed a series of intended onboard preventative health procedures, which had previously been agreed upon between the CDC and CLIA as early as April 3.

By June 19, CLIA announced that it would extend its voluntary suspension of sailings until September 15. This was followed by the CDC's July 16 extension of its no-sail order to September 30.

Stranded cruise ship workers should be under no illusion that in the life-and-death crisis they and their families face, their employers have been merely helpless victims of the policies of worldwide governments. From the billions in profits generated by the global cruising industry, as well as the access to ready cash that has been guaranteed them by all of the major banks and the US financial system, the resources exist to ensure the safe repatriation for all seafarers around the world. It is the national profit interests and property rights of the global capitalist class that stand as the major obstacles to the fundamental right of seafarers to be returned home safely.

Cruise ship workers must build rank-and-file organizations to coordinate the action of all seafarers and land-based workers to demand repatriation, safe and healthy conditions and compensation for lost wages. For more information on building rank and file organizations to take up this struggle, please contact the WSWS.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>