

# Mauritian cruise ship crews strike to demand repatriation

By Tom Casey  
12 September 2020

Crew members aboard the Mediterranean Shipping Company's (MSC) Poesia and Musica cruise ships have taken strike action in opposition to the company's months-long failure to repatriate its employees. The two vessels, along with the MSC Seaview, have been stranded near the port of Santos, Brazil since the height of the coronavirus pandemic and the cruise industry's shutdown in late March.

On Tuesday, a group of 25 employees on the Musica took to the upper deck of the ship, refusing to return to their cabins until the company guaranteed their travel arrangements. Workers staged similar actions on the Poesia, brandishing signs that contained messages such as "Hostage: MSC stop lying," "We also have families," and "Send us back home: our life matters."

Between the three MSC vessels off the Brazilian coast, there are 103 crew members from Mauritius who have been trapped on board for nearly six months. Accounting for the fact that for some crew, contracts of employment began well before the pandemic, it is likely that many of these workers have not seen their families for far longer than that.

A worker on the Seaview who spoke with the WSWs confirmed that the actions of the Musica and the Poesia crew came in the wake of several canceled repatriation dates given by the company, which it blamed on the border policies of the Mauritian government. The employees have had several travel plans issued by MSC fall through since July.

Like many marooned cruise ship workers, the stranded Mauritian MSC crew members have been cut off from the company payroll since March. A video published by TopFM.mu, a Mauritian news source, shows a worker on the Poesia describing her inability to pay for her expenses for her children back home. Similarly harrowing stories have been commonplace

among stranded cruise ship workers of all nationalities.

Mauritius is a small island country in the western Indian Ocean, approximately 700 miles from the coast of Madagascar. As national borders around the world closed in the initial stages of the pandemic, the Mauritian administration of Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth collaborated with the country's largest privately held tourism corporation, Air Mauritius, Ltd, to impose exorbitant fees on the return of its approximately 4,000 citizens requiring repatriation and quarantine.

It has taken almost half a year for the global cruise industry and worldwide governments to send home nearly 200,000 international workers who were stranded in the wake of the pandemic. In mid-August, there were approximately 12,000 workers still trapped in US waters, with likely thousands more abroad.

A Wednesday article in the *New York Times*, entitled "Trapped by Exhaustion and Despair," cites the International Transportation Workers' Federation (ITF), a major seafarers' trade union, as estimating that on merchant cargo vessels last month, "300,000 of the 1.2 million crew members at sea were essentially stranded on their ships, working past the expiration of their original contracts and fighting isolation, uncertainty and fatigue." The WSWs has extensively reported on the deadly conditions facing these stranded seafaring workers, among which there have been dozens of deaths due to COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as several other deaths, which are widely suspected to have been suicides or deaths of despair.

MSC is the world's fourth largest cruise company. It is also the world's largest cruise enterprise that is entirely privately held, earning €405 million in profits in 2019, up from €348 million in 2018 [1]. Doubtlessly fueling the ire of its stranded employees is the fact that

while its workers have been held hostage on its vessels for months, the company has been among the most ruthless ship operators to push for a resumption of sailings. Last month, amidst several failed European cruise industry restart attempts, as well as the extension of the Cruise Line Industry Association's (CLIA) voluntary suspension of US sailings, the company managed to be among the first to complete a "successful" cruise since the shutdown of its 2,500-passenger voyage on the Grandiosa.

An August 19 article by the industry publication *The Maritime Executive* declared that "all eyes are now [on] MSC Grandiosa to see if it can successfully navigate these tricky waters and give this ailing industry some hope." On Thursday, the *Giornale di Sicilia* (Journal of Sicily) reported that an Israeli employee on the Grandiosa who had tested positive but was asymptomatic for COVID-19 was evacuated Wednesday into a quarantine facility near Messina.

Although the company boasted that the infected employee's quick diagnosis and subsequent evacuation reflect its preparedness for coronavirus outbreaks, stating that their enhanced protocol "makes our boats places of total safety," all claims by MSC that the welfare of their crew is paramount are belied by the horrendous treatment of its workers on board the Poesia, Musica and Seaview.

It was only late on Thursday, doubtlessly in response to the courageous action by its crew members, that MSC issued travel confirmation to its employees. According to a report on defimedia.info, crew members are scheduled to travel home on September 16th.

But the struggle facing seafaring workers is far from concluded. If anything, the stand taken by the Mauritian workers on the MSC Poesia and Musica demonstrates that it is only the direct intervention of the workforce that will deter the major corporations in their relentless drive to enrich their top executives at the expense of the health, safety and basic rights of their employees.

It is significant to note that neither the ITF nor its official Cruise Ship Task Force has made any official statement on—let alone an endorsement of—the actions taken by the Musica and Poesia crew. There remains in this thoroughly corporatized organization little connection to the day-to-day struggles facing the global seafaring work force that it claims to represent.

We urge ship crew around the world to form rank-and file organizations to prepare for the political tasks involved in carrying out the struggles necessary to defend the basic rights of all maritime workers, and the working class as a whole. For more information about rank-and-file committees, please contact the WSWs today.

[1] Seatrade Cruise News: MSC Cruises reports 2019 profit, outlines steps to bolster financial position, March 20th, 2020 — <https://www.seatrade-cruise.com/news/msc-cruises-reports-2019-profit-outlines-steps-bolster-financial-position>

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