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# DELIVERING THE GOODS

*A Newsletter by the Maritime Labor Alliance*

## **Alaska: Community Service, Infrastructure, Politics & Good Government**

There is a conflict going on today in the State of Alaska that is representative of the many tensions facing our country at large. This conflict, revolving around the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS), calls into question Alaska's commitment to the well-being of its citizens and the preservation of an essential public service.

Since 1963 the AMHS has provided essential marine transportation services to the coastal communities of Alaska. This first-class state-operated ferry system has bound the communities of Alaska economically and socially for 56 years. It is as necessary to the sustainability of dozens of Alaskan communities as are public utilities, hospitals, schools and emergency services. In fact, the Alaska Marine Highway System is the only available transportation system for many of the island communities it serves. These are often communities where highway and bridge systems are not to be found, air travel is excessively expensive or non-existent and private marine transportation is simply unavailable.

Until recently some 33 ports and 175 Alaskan communities were serviced by 11 vessels connecting the coastal communities of Southeast Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, as well as the ports of Bellingham, Washington and Prince Rupert, British Columbia. This system, like almost all essential ferry services, and indeed, almost all public transportation services around the world, receives government funding. In principle, this is little different from the expenditure of public funds for the construction and maintenance of local roadways and our interstate highway system.

Today, despite decades of safe, reliable and essential service to Alaska's coastal communities, the system is being mothballed, funding has been decimated and preparations are being made behind the scenes to privatize it. A privately operated, for profit ferry service of sufficient magnitude to serve these communities is destined to fail. Ferry services, like highways, municipal transit systems and public services, are generally rarely positioned to be self-sustaining or to generate profits. "Public services" are just that - services to the public. The Alaska Marine Highways System is a service to the taxpayers of Alaska that connects coastal communities, allowing local residents to travel for work, school, medical care, affordable food, shopping and the transport of cargo for innumerable small businesses.

In addition, the ferry service brings essential tourist dollars to coastal communities, infusing the local economies with much needed resources and providing a large part of the revenue that pays for the services. This is being done today safely, reliably and efficiently in Alaska in some of the most challenging coastal waterways of the world.

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As of November 1<sup>st</sup>, all but three AMHS vessels are laid up. The future of the system is in grave doubt. Communities are left in isolation and exposed to outrageous transportation costs. This is being done for purely political purposes at a time when funding is available to maintain this essential state service.

An understanding of the motivations behind this does not require training in political science. It is all too clear that this first-rate government service is losing the funding it needs to serve a portion of the state population which is in many locations isolated, often underprivileged and less vocal. In short, it is an easy political target. Attacks on public services may provide short term political gain, or they may not. What is certain is that the destruction of a critical and longstanding part of the infrastructure of Alaska will cause long term harm to the social and economic fabric of the coastal communities of the state.

In conjunction with this attack on vulnerable communities is a coordinated attack on state workers. Today, not only ferry workers, but all workers employed by State and local government in Alaska are being targeted and threatened with loss of collective bargaining rights, job security and hard-earned terms and conditions of employment. Again, this may or may not bring short term political gain to the instigators of these changes. However, as with the social cohesion of small and often vulnerable communities and reliable transportation infrastructure, the long-term cost to the well-being of the state and nation at large must be considered. Such changes will not bring prosperity to the state or to the average citizen.

Good and responsible government does not abandon its citizens. Alaskans need a first-rate ferry system. **The State of Alaska should fund the ferry system to the level that will provide service to the communities in need in Southeast Alaska.** Coastal Alaskans, Alaskan workers and the Maritime Labor Alliance will work together for good government - by the people and for the people.



*The Maritime Labor Alliance consists of five leading maritime labor unions: American Radio Association (ARA), Inlandboatmen's Union of the Pacific (IBU), International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (M.E.B.A.), and International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P). Together, we represent maritime workers employed in every sector of the industry. Members of MLA unions have served the country on the docks and at sea in peace and war from 1875 to today.*