Access to COVID-19 Vaccine for Maritime Workers

At this time, there is a growing crisis in America’s supply chain. The COVID-19 pandemic has put international trade and U.S. economic security at risk, both at sea and on the docks. In Southern California, the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach—the nation’s greatest cargo transport hub—are seeing vessels backed up at anchor awaiting available container terminal berths. Some 1,000 West Coast longshore workers have been infected by COVID-19 and over a dozen have died. Many more longshore workers are off the job because of the pandemic, causing extreme port congestion and delay. At sea, COVID-19 has created hardship for seafarers to a level unprecedented in peacetime. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of the marine transportation network and the supply chain that relies on it.

Vaccines must be made available for the approximately 60,000 frontline longshore workers around our country and the 20,000 U.S. citizen merchant mariners who are responsible for keeping the economic and military supply lines of the United States open along our coasts and on the high seas. The undersigned organizations are deeply concerned that the economic and military security of our nation may be at risk if vaccines are not quickly distributed to essential maritime workers. At this time, no account is being taken of longshore workers’ critical role in our supply chain. Further, seafarers, who are by definition transient workers, must not be allowed to fall between the cracks and be denied access by state health authorities distributing vaccines under the guidelines established by the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP).

We urge the federal government to take an active role in seeing that the transportation hubs of our nation remain open by allocating the necessary resources to vaccinate maritime workers. We urge every state health authority to facilitate the vaccination of seafarers who are located within their borders.

Seafarers live and work closely together in multi-generational settings aboard ship for months at a time. The risks of close contact and exposure aboard ship are exacerbated by the lack of medical care when seafarers become infected while engaged in extended foreign voyages or when routinely denied shoreside access to medical care in foreign ports. Professional medical care and hospital equipment are simply not available aboard merchant ships. By the nature of their work, seafarers travel to all parts of the world and regularly interact with people from other countries, cultures and health systems. They interact with longshore and other shoreside workers in every port they visit. Even during heightened awareness of COVID-19, with precautionary measures in place, vessel crews and port workers are at
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.