

MARINE ENGINEERS' BENEFICIAL ASSOCIATION (AFL-CIO)

"On Watch in Peace and War since 1875"



M.E.B.A. TELEX TIMES

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PANDEMIC SHOULD SPUR U.S. TO REBUILD ITS COMMERCIAL FLEET

A national security policy think-tank official has written a prominent article arguing that the ongoing pandemic highlights the need for the country to solidify and expand the U.S.-flag commercial fleet.

The Lexington Institute's Chief Operating Officer Loren Thompson penned an April 17 article for *Forbes* magazine making that argument. Entitled "Coronavirus Makes The National Security Case For Rebuilding U.S. Maritime Power Compelling," the author points out that the current crisis highlights how China is seizing the means of control with its ever-expanding commercial fleet, relentless shipbuilding and continuous investment in commercial port facilities around the world. The current crisis, he says, showcases new reasons for concern "such as the recent revelation that Chinese authorities are not allowing U.S. healthcare companies to export medical supplies like face masks from their plants in China (most of the antibiotics used in the U.S. originate in China)."

As Maritime Administrator Rear Adm. Mark Buzby recently re-emphasized, America's strength and readiness are challenged by a limited U.S.-flag commercial fleet, an outdated U.S. government-owned fleet, and the shortage of qualified mariners necessary to sustain overseas military operations. With China's growing sea power and America's maritime limitations, Thompson worries that, "In a crisis, Beijing could leverage its commercial strength at sea to defeat America's military before it even managed to reach war zones, for example by impeding port access, preventing access to third-party shipping, and leaving the U.S.-flag fleet with inadequate sealift for moving materiel."

He noted that America was guilty of shortchanging its shipping capabilities before World War I and World War II and had to play catch-up both times to be able to project its power on a scale suitable for victory.

He applauded the Jones Act and Maritime Security Program as helpful - yet inadequate to solve the problem alone. "What is needed is a comprehensive strategy for maintaining a global commercial maritime presence comparable to the military presence that the U.S. Navy exerts," he wrote. He called for raising the percentage of cargo preference requirements, bringing back construction differential subsidies that will aid U.S. shipbuilding and possibly expanding the MSP along with other steps to level the playing field with other countries and strengthen U.S.-flag shipping.

“As policymakers rethink economic priorities in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis, now would be a good time to recommit to being a first-class commercial seafaring nation,” he concluded. The article was posted to M.E.B.A.’s Facebook site and tweeted out.

SLOWDOWN ON THE LAKES

Shipping companies on the Great Lakes are feeling the hurt from the economic slowdown and its effects on cargo demand. ArcelorMittal announced the idling of its Hibbing, Minnesota taconite (iron ore) mine as the market for steel continues to slump aided by the shuttering of automaker plants. Cargoes are down across the board and shipping companies are beginning to lay-up vessels and some are furloughing employees as they finish moving the inventory built up over the winter. Interlake Steamship recently announced the temporary layup of the JAMES R. BARKER and the PAUL R. TREGURTHA.

Lake Carriers’ Association President Jim Weakley said, “We’re a service industry, and we need cargo in order to keep the ships moving...and we are hopeful the cargo will be there to bounce back, soon.” LCA represents 13 companies that operate vessels on the Great Lakes including M.E.B.A.-contracted Interlake Steamship Company.

COMFORT ENDING NEW YORK MISSION

The USNS COMFORT will close out its mission in New York Harbor after the City determined that shoreside medical facilities are currently able to handle a more stabilized level of coronavirus cases requiring hospitalization. The Military Sealift Command hospital ship arrived in New York on March 30 initially to treat non-coronavirus patients and relieve the burden of overburdened area hospitals. But the rigid screening process in place, along with a minor amount of non-COVID-19 patients referred to the ship, prompted officials to reconfigure COMFORT’s mission. The vessel then put systems in place to better meet the challenges presented by unloading infectious patients, and the medical crew began treating those stricken with the virus. But shoreside facilities including the opening of a makeshift disaster hospital at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan helped keep the city from needing the vessel to handle overflow cases. Governor Andrew Cuomo appreciated the vessel’s presence but recommended that it be deployed elsewhere if needed. “I believe COMFORT not only brought comfort but also saved lives,” he said.

It appears the ship will pack up and head back to its berth in Norfolk, VA but may rejoin the fight against coronavirus if ordered.

The USNS MERCY continues its mission in Los Angeles treating non-COVID-19 patients, though at least seven sailors onboard contracted the virus and were taken off the ship. Other crewmembers were tested and found to be uninfected. A few weeks back, the COMFORT found that four crewmembers had tested positive and were removed. Reports indicate that those crewmembers have since recovered.

IMO TO SEAFARERS: “YOU ARE NOT ALONE”

“You are not alone. You are not forgotten”. So said International Maritime Organization Secretary-General Kitack Lim in a moving personal message to seafarers everywhere, assuring them that IMO understands the unique problems they face during the coronavirus pandemic and has been working tirelessly at all levels to find solutions for them. Hundreds of ship sailings have been canceled as trade has been reduced in line with the slowing global economy, and ports all over the world have either

closed or drastically cut their operations. But restrictions on travel and personal movement adopted by most countries have left many seafarers stranded on board ships, unable to disembark or be replaced by relief crews. Others find themselves stuck in hotels, without pay and unable to get flights home.

Estimates suggest that, every month, 100,000 seafarers finish their contracts and would normally be flown home - but the coronavirus has had a huge negative impact on this repatriation process. Since the start of the global lockdown, IMO has been in urgent contact with trade unions, seafarer welfare organizations, shipowners, governments and fellow United Nations agencies, especially the International Labor Organization, to seek solutions.

Lim said he had been “deeply touched by the many stories we have heard from individual seafarers of the challenges, hardships and sacrifices that seafarers have made to keep the global supply chain moving while helping the global population.” He noted the difficulties the maritime industry has faced in conducting crew changeovers, providing medical care for sick and injured crew and allowing for shore leave, and added “the inability to resupply or repatriate crews concerns me greatly”.

Describing seafarers as being in the “front line” of the global fight against the pandemic, Lim said, “All of us at IMO understand the challenges you face.” He added “To all seafarers, my message to you is strong and clear: We are listening. We hear you.”

AFL-CIO RE-ISSUES CALL TO PROTECT FRONTLINE WORKERS BEFORE RE-OPENING

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka warned those who are hellbent to reopen the economy that any such decisions should be made with worker safety and sound science in mind. He said, “Many people are asking when we can reopen the economy instead of focusing on how we should reopen responsibly. A rush to open without the proper protections for workers will lead to an explosion of COVID-19, many more deaths and another shutdown. It is a surefire way to increase the death count and plunge our economy into a second Great Depression. There is no room for error. Not one inch. We have to get this right.”

He praised the service of frontline workers in helping the country navigate this crisis but pointed out that essential workers are being unnecessarily exposed to the virus because of a shortfall of supplied protection equipment. The country also needs to step up testing and beef up workplace health and safety standards that hold employers accountable, he said.

He checked off a list of urgent needs that must be filled before state and federal officials attempt to get things back to normal. Among other things, he called for decisions to be made in concert with working people who are the ones who put their lives on the line. Key decisions need to be made based on science, he said, rather than “politics or profits.” He wants workers to have better protection against retaliation from employers if they refuse to work because of fear of exposure, sometimes due to the belief that proper protection has not been provided. He called for improved tracking of worker infections and better information sharing. Potentially exposed workers should not be removed without pay or benefits and strong, clear and enforceable workplace health and safety standards must be in place.

AFL-CIO said that these are some of the components that must be in place if we want to successfully emerge from this crisis. President Trumka said, “Nothing would be worse for the economy than a premature reopening followed by an explosion of the disease and a second shutdown. Putting worker safety first is the first step in any viable plan to save lives, defeat the coronavirus and revive the economy.”

VIOLENCE COULD ERUPT IF NAVY SHIPS ARE HARASSED AGAIN

Next time, the U.S. Navy might not be as forgiving of Iranian harassment as they were a few weeks back. In the last *Telex Times* we reported on an incident in the North Arabian Gulf where eleven Iranian fastboats harassed six U.S. Fifth Fleet vessels. The M.E.B.A.-crewed Military Sealift Command vessel USNS LEWIS PULLER was one the vessels that was subjected to Iranian boat hijinks that lasted about an hour. The fastboats repeatedly crossed the bows and sterns of the U.S. vessels at extremely close range and high speeds. The Navy vessels issued a series of radio warnings and horn blasts but otherwise endured the interference and dangerous maneuvers.

President Trump this week announced he had instructed the Navy to “shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea.” The President’s tweet on the subject comes shortly after Iran’s announcement that it has launched its first military satellite into orbit giving rise to suspicions that the country is working on an intercontinental ballistic missile system.

NMC WILL SEND RENEWAL EXAMS BY EMAIL

Beginning next week, the National Maritime Center (NMC) will launch a centralized electronic delivery process (via e-mail) for renewal examinations. This will provide mariners the ability to request, complete, and submit renewal examinations by e-mail and will help to maintain the flow of mariner credentials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paper mailings will still be available upon request.

Approval to test (ATT) letters for renewal examinations issued on or after May 1, 2020, will include directions on how to obtain an electronic examination, and the process will be outlined on the NMC Examinations Page website. Mariners who received an ATT letter and have not received their examination may follow the new e-mail process. Mariners who already received a hard-copy renewal examination should complete it as directed in the previously mailed correspondence. The full NMC notice has been posted on the M.E.B.A. website in the Documents & Member Notices section.

Any questions, concerns, or feedback can be directed to the NMC Customer Service Center by e-mailing IASKNMC@uscg.mil, or by calling 1-888-IASKNMC (427-5662).

UPDATE YOUR CONTACT INFO

Be sure to inform Headquarters if you have changed your contact information. There is an address change form on our website to help expedite the process. It can be found at www.mebaunion.org under the “Members” tab or in the “Documents & Notices” section. Alternatively, you can send your updated information to Renee Bowman at HQ by mail, fax at (202) 638-5369, or e-mail at membership@mebaunion.org Since the M.E.B.A. Plans office in Baltimore and Headquarters databases are NOT linked, you must also forward a signed change of address form to the Plans Office if you wish to update your information with them.

In addition to the weekly *Telex Times* and our website, the Union continues to keep members informed through communications to our Union halls and offices - as well as by mass emails sent to members, applicants and retirees. If you want to ensure that you are part of the contact list receiving future

updates, you must have a valid email address on file with M.E.B.A. Headquarters. Details of the online membership meetings were sent to members at their email addresses on file. M.E.B.A. also has the capability to contact members by text message if their cell phone information is accurate and on file with HQ.

ONLINE MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS IN MAY

Members Should Check Their Email Notification

Monday, May 4 – Boston@1200; Seattle (Fife)@1300;

Tuesday, May 5 – CMES@1430; Charleston@1400; Houston@1315; Oakland@1230;

Wednesday, May 6 – Jacksonville@1300; New Orleans@1315;

Thursday, May 7 – L.A. (San Pedro)@1230; NY/NJ@1300; Norfolk@1300; Tampa@1300;

Monday, May 8 – Honolulu@1100.

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The M.E.B.A. is the nation's oldest maritime labor union, established in 1875. M.E.B.A.'s expertise and proven track record of readiness, safety, and loyalty in answering America's call to action in times of both peace and war is unrivaled in the world. M.E.B.A. HQ – Phone: (202) 638-5355; mebahq@mebaunion.org. Visit us on Facebook. For publication and related inquiries (and to send photos & hot news tips) contact Marco Cannistraro, M.E.B.A. Special Projects & Communications – marco@mebaunion.org Visit us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter and check us out on Instagram.