MARINE ENGINEERS' BENEFICIAL ASSOCIATION (AFL-CIO)

"On Watch in Peace and War since 1875"

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U.S. BEGINS CLOSING PORT FEE LOOPHOLE FOR CARGO ENTERING VIA CANADA & MEXICO

Two members of the Federal Maritime Commission say the Trump administration has begun acting to shut down a long-criticized tax gap that allows cargo entering the U.S. through Canada or Mexico to sidestep U.S. port fees. In a statement released Thursday, FMC Commissioners Max Vekich and Laura DiBella said federal agencies are now moving to enforce collection of the Harbor Maintenance Tax on foreign cargo that crosses into the U.S. by land after transiting Canadian or Mexican ports. They described the action as a significant change in how the U.S. polices maritime trade and port competition.

The effort stems from Section 6 of April 9, 2025 Presidential Executive Order, "Restoring America's Maritime Dominance," which directed the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Customs and Border Protection to collect all applicable duties, taxes and fees at land borders. That includes the Harbor Maintenance Tax, along with a new 10 percent service fee intended to cover additional CBP processing costs. The HMT, set at 0.125 percent of a shipment's declared value, funds dredging and upkeep at U.S. ports and harbors. For years, however, shippers have been able to avoid the charge by routing cargo through foreign ports and then moving it into the U.S. by truck or rail.

Commissioners Vekich and DiBella said that loophole has played a major role in reshaping North American supply chains. Over the past two decades, they argued, Canadian ports - supported by substantial public investment - expanded capacity well beyond domestic needs and aggressively pursued U.S.-bound cargo. Similar dynamics, they noted, are increasingly visible at Mexican ports as cross-border logistics networks grow.

The joint statement noted, "Ports in Canada have been capturing market share at our nation's expense for almost two decades. They have leveraged substantial government-provided investment to build infrastructure to handle U.S. cargo and have built twice the port capacity necessary to serve the Canadian domestic market." The commissioners said, "Importantly, Canada has also benefited from loopholes in U.S. tax law to offer a lower cost alternative to U.S. shippers: Cargo shipped through ports in Canada and Mexico and then into the U.S. over land borders can avoid taxes assessed at U.S. ports, including the Harbor Maintenance Tax."

According to the commissioners, ending the exemption would bolster domestic port competitiveness and support U.S. maritime labor, from longshore workers to truck drivers and related trades.

A Federal Maritime Commission study published in 2012 estimated that closing the tax gap could redirect as much as 50 percent of U.S.-bound container traffic moving through Canada's West Coast ports back to American ports. The commissioners warned that failing to act would continue to drain cargo volumes, capital investment and jobs from U.S. gateways, especially as new terminal developments advance north and south of the border. They said enforcing Section 6 would remove what they view as an artificial cost advantage enjoyed by foreign ports and could help stabilize U.S. port operations. Without such action, they cautioned, expansion abroad could eventually contribute to terminal closures at home.

The commissioners said, "the situation today is urgent as new Canadian and Mexican port development projects are planned, and these projects could result in the closure of port terminals in the U.S. Implementation of Section 6 would eliminate the artificial cost advantage that is undermining our economy and helping to justify these projects."

Vekich and DiBella emphasized that their remarks reflect their individual perspectives and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Federal Maritime Commission.

RENEWED THREATS TO RED SEA SHIPPING AS IRAN SITUATION HEIGHTENS TENSION

Houthi forces are intensifying their information campaign alongside renewed threats against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, releasing stark new video footage that signals the potential for further attacks. The short video, circulated online with the single caption "Soon," features imagery of a vessel engulfed in flames - footage previously associated with the group's campaign against international shipping.

The Houthis have already claimed responsibility for attacks on more than 100 vessels transiting the Red Sea corridor, framing the assaults as pressure on Israel over its war with Hamas in Gaza. The latest messaging suggests the group intends to resume or expand those operations, raising fresh concerns for maritime security along one of the world's most critical trade routes.

These threats come amid rapidly escalating tensions across the Middle East. Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem warned over the weekend that any military action against Iran would be treated as an attack on Hezbollah itself. Speaking at a solidarity rally in Lebanon, Qassem said the group would not remain neutral if Tehran were targeted, cautioning that a war involving Iran would ignite conflict across the region.

The warning coincides with a visible expansion of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East. According to reports, the aircraft carrier USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN and several guided-missile destroyers have entered the region under U.S. Central Command. The Pentagon has also announced the deployment of additional fighter aircraft and air-defense systems, and said U.S. forces would conduct exercises aimed at demonstrating their ability to rapidly deploy, disperse, and sustain combat airpower.

President Donald Trump has reiterated that military action against Iran remains an option, while a senior Iranian official responded last week by warning that Tehran would regard any attack as an "all-out war," underscoring how quickly the situation could escalate.

Regional governments are also moving to protect their interests. The United Arab Emirates said Monday that it would not allow its airspace, territory, or territorial waters to be used for hostile military actions against Iran. The statement carries particular significance given the presence of Al Dhafra Air Base south of Abu Dhabi, a key hub for U.S. Air Force operations in the region.

The growing security crisis is unfolding just as major shipping lines were testing a cautious return to the Red Sea. However, carriers have largely reversed course now, highlighting how fragile confidence remains.

NEW COAST GUARD PORTAL IMPROVES ONLINE CREDENTIALING SERVICES FOR MARINERS

The Coast Guard has launched a new, easier-to-use online system that allows mariners to submit and track credential applications faster and more securely.

The Application Submission and Additional Information Portal, known as ASAP, lets mariners apply for Merchant Mariner Credentials and Medical Certificates, upload documents and monitor application status in one place. The system is now the primary way to submit applications to the Coast Guard's National Maritime Center.

The redesigned portal features simpler navigation, clearer instructions and improved document uploads. The changes are designed to simplify the credentialing process and improve document tracking. Mariners are encouraged to review the step-by step tutorial before submitting an application to become familiar with the new system.

For questions regarding these changes, contact the National Maritime Center Customer Service Center, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Eastern time via online chat, email at IASKNMC@uscg.mil or by phone at 1-888-IASKNMC (427-5662).

SEAFARER ABANDONMENT: WORST YEAR ON RECORD

Seafarer abandonment hit record levels in 2025, according to new data compiled by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), with 6,223 seafarers abandoned across 410 ships. Seafarer abandonment is in crisis, with the data marking the sixth year in a row that the number of vessels on which abandonments occurred has broken records and the fourth year in a row that the total number of seafarers abandoned has broken records: the numbers represent a 31% increase in such ship abandonments compared to 2024, and a 32% increase in seafarer abandonment.

ITF data, which will be submitted in a report to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) ahead of its discussion at a legal committee meeting this year, also shows that seafarers were owed a total of $25.8 million in 2025 as a consequence of the abandonments. From this total, the ITF has recovered and returned $16.5 million to seafarers.

The ITF and its team of Inspectors, which includes M.E.B.A.'s Eric White, continue to assist international seafarers by making sure they have basic amenities, are properly repatriated at the end of their ship assignments and receive the wages they are owed. ITF's inspectors enforce agreements with shipowners. They board vessels to check that seafarers have decent pay, working conditions and living standards.

Seafarer abandonment is defined by the IMO under three criteria: failing to cover the cost of a seafarer's repatriation; leaving a seafarer without necessary maintenance and support; unilaterally severing ties with a seafarer, including failure to pay contractual wages for a period of at least two months. The IMO and the International Labour Organization (ILO) run a joint seafarer abandonment database: of 410 abandonments last year, the ITF reported 400 (98 percent).

Indian seafarers were the worst affected national group in 2025, as in 2024, with 1,125 seafarers abandoned – at the end of 2025, the Indian Government announced that 'blacklisting' measures would be taken to protect seafarers from ships with a record of repeat abandonments and other bad practices. Filipino seafarers were the second worst affected, with 539 abandoned, followed by Syrians with 309 abandoned.

Flag of Convenience (FOCs) vessels feature prominently in abandonment: 337 vessels abandoned in 2025 – 82% of the total – were flying FOC flags. The ITF estimates that around 30% of the entire 100,000-strong global fleet of merchant vessels fly FOCs.

As in 2024, Panama, an FOC, remains the Flag State with the most abandonments (68, up from 43), while the number of abandonments under an unknown flag have more than doubled (46, up from 20).

INJURIES ON-THE-JOB DECREASED DURING LATEST BLS REPORTING PERIOD

Workers in private industry experienced fewer nonfatal injuries and illnesses on the job in 2024 than in 2023, according to Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses data released Jan. 22 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The number of reported workplace injuries and illnesses in the U.S. private sector totaled an estimated 2.5 million in 2024. That's down from about 2.6 million (3.1%) the year before. The data shows that the decrease was driven by drops of 26% and 46% in illnesses and respiratory illnesses, respectively. The report analyzes the last full year for which complete data and its verification exists.

The 148,000 illnesses and 54,000 respiratory illnesses recorded were both the fewest since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The release of the annual BLS injury and illness data, as well as the release of the agency's 2024 workplace fatality data (now expected in February), was delayed about two months because of the federal government shutdown from Oct. 1 to Nov. 12.

In 2024, the total recordable incident rate in private industry was 2.3 per 100 full-time equivalent employees – down from 2.4 per 100 FTEs in 2023. The 2.2 injuries per 100 FTEs in 2024 was unchanged from 2023. For illnesses, the incident rate decreased to 13.9 cases per 10,000 FTEs from 19 in 2023. The respiratory illness rate also saw a sharp decrease: to 5.1 per 10,000 FTEs from 9.5.

No industry sector experienced an increase in incident rates, and five industry sectors had decreases. Among those was health care and social assistance, which had 3.4 cases per 100 FTEs in 2024 compared with 3.6 in 2023.

The No. 1 cause of DART cases (days away from work, restricted or transferred) for the two-year period of 2023-2024 was "overexertion, repetitive motion and bodily conditions" (around 946,000). That was closely followed by "contact incidents," which was linked to approximately 860,000 cases.

The median time away from work over that two-year period was eight days, while the median time for a job transfer or restriction was 15 days. The 1.8 million cases involving days away from work comprised 61.5% of the DART cases.

NEXT MONTHLY MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS *(All times are local)*
Monday, February 2 – **Boston**@1200. **Seattle (Fife)**@1300.
Tuesday, February 3 – **CMES**@1430; **Charleston**@1400; **Houston**@1315; **Oakland**@1230.
Wednesday, February 4 – **Jacksonville**@1300; **New Orleans**@1315; **Online HQ "Town Hall" Meeting@**1300 **(No Voting) – Register by emailing** mebahq@mebaunion.org
Thursday, February 5 – **L.A. (San Pedro)@**1230; **NY/NJ@**1300; **Norfolk@**1300; **Tampa@**1300.
Friday, February 6 – **Honolulu**@1100

------FINISHED WITH ENGINES------

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If you see something, say something – The M.E.B.A. Emergency Hotline
can be reached at 1-888-519-0018.

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