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DELIVERING THE GOODS

A Newsletter by the Maritime Labor Alliance

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

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great risk of contracting the virus. The industry has experienced and will continue to experience COVID-19 outbreaks aboard ships, tugs and all types of merchant vessels.

It is notable that the CDC has given higher priority to ferry workers due to their role in mass transit. However, the supply chain should not be ignored. While the CDC and the U.S. Coast Guard have recently issued stringent face mask requirements for vessel personnel and port workers in U.S. waters and transportation hubs, further steps need to be taken. Unfortunately, the CDC has not raised the vaccination priority level for mariners other than ferry workers, and in any event, neither they nor the U.S. Coast Guard have the ability to authorize the distribution of vaccines. Significantly, the Department of Defense and the U.S. Navy have recognized the need for vessel personnel to be vaccinated. They are making vaccines available to civil service merchant mariners and mariners employed aboard government-chartered vessels, but the vast majority of merchant mariners are excluded, along with other critical supply chain port workers.

With oversight from the appropriate government entity and maritime employers, we can assist with the vaccination of merchant mariners and port workers by providing the logistical and educational support necessary to accomplish the task. The U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) has the ability to support in this effort. We urge state and federal governments to distribute vaccines to approved medical facilities for the vaccination of longshore workers and merchant mariners.

Our numbers are not great, but we play an outsized role in maintaining the economic and military security of our nation. Our harbors must not be backed up and commerce interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis must be addressed now.

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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.