



Seafarer Statement 2026

Putting the MLC at the Heart of Decision Making

Global trade, energy security, food supply, and crisis resilience depend highly on shipping. About 90% of world trade is transported by sea, supported by a workforce of over 2.5 million seafarers on up to 74,000 vessels. Without shipping, national economies and societies cannot function, let alone thrive. Seafarers are key workers who underpin national prosperity and global stability by facilitating the movement of over 12 billion tons of cargo and well over 30 million ocean-going passengers annually. Yet their role remains largely invisible in political decision-making outside maritime ministries.

This year marks two decades since the adoption of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006) – the most successful international maritime labour instrument ever adopted and implemented, which sets global standards for seafarers' working and living conditions on board ships, and ensures the maintenance of a global level playing field for good employment standards. The MLC, 2006 consolidated 68 international labour conventions and recommendations into a single, flexible, enforceable framework that protects seafarers, while ensuring fair competition for shipowners.

Its strength lies not only in its articles, regulations, standards and guidelines, but in the cooperation it generates between governments, employers and workers through the tripartite regulatory system of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Convention also provides mechanisms for consultation and communication between representatives of seafarers and shipowners at national level. Where the MLC, 2006 is fully implemented, shipping is safer, more predictable and more sustainable. Where it is weakened, not applied or applied inconsistently, both seafarers and fair competition become more vulnerable.

The anniversary of the MLC, 2006 comes against the backdrop of heightened geopolitical tension, climate transition and systemic pressure on global supply chains. Decisions taken outside of the maritime sector – in areas such as border control, public health and national security – significantly influence the operation of shipping and the lives of seafarers working on board ships. Taking these decisions without maritime awareness can lead to significant detrimental consequences for seafarers and global trade.

Ten Key Policy Focus Areas

The following ten key policy focus areas are presented in two categories: the first highlights factors that continue to positively shape the seafarer employment landscape, while the second identifies areas where further action is urgently required through strengthened cooperation between industry, unions, governments and intergovernmental organisations.

Promoting Regulatory Frameworks for Employment of Seafarers



Protecting the MLC, 2006 as a cornerstone of decent work at sea

The MLC, 2006 stands as the most important and effective industry labour instrument, ensuring decent working and living conditions for seafarers on board ships and a level playing field for good employment standards. Full ratification, implementation and timely adoption of agreed amendments are vitally important. Partial application by governments undermines both seafarer protection and fair competition.



Positive and inclusive shipboard cultures

Fostering positive shipboard cultures is crucial for seafarer wellbeing – including for women and other groups potentially vulnerable to discrimination – helping to build trust, respect, and mutual commitment between employers and workers, while also contributing to business success and employee retention. Through coordinated and consistent ratification and implementation, the relevant MLC provisions which aim to eliminate violence and harassment on board must be upheld by all stakeholders.



Continuing support of ILO recommended minimum seafarer wage negotiations

The shipping sector is unique in its establishment of a recommended global minimum wage, applying to the rating grade of Able Seafarer. It is essential to support and abide by this international agreement for a wage basis, which is established jointly between shipowners and seafarers, under the auspices of the ILO.



Ensuring balanced training and supporting a just transition

The MLC, 2006 requires that seafarers must be trained, certified or qualified as competent to perform their duties on board ships, including in accordance with standards adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). IMO's STCW Convention provides a global legal framework to ensure that all seafarers operating on international ships meet its high universal standards of competence. With revisions to this Convention ongoing, it is vital that training requirements focus on essential new skills yet avoid overloading seafarers with unnecessary training. Seafarers - who are critical to shipping's decarbonisation and energy transition - may require new training and skills development for a just transition.

Areas for Action

Ensuring fair treatment for seafarers

Shipping's global nature brings seafarers into contact with different jurisdictions and legal systems, so they require special protection, especially in relation to contacts with public authorities. Too often, crews are detained for long periods during legal investigations without due process or regard for their human rights and mental health. To address this, national governments should commit to protecting seafarers' rights in all circumstances, including by taking into account the ILO-IMO 'Guidelines on fair treatment of seafarers detained in connection with alleged crimes'.

Safeguarding maritime security and freedom of navigation

Merchant ships are often impacted by global conflict and maritime security incidents, which threaten the safety of seafarers. This includes holding seafarers in unlawful captivity and illegal seizures or attacks against ships operating in accordance with international standards and regulations. These actions represent flagrant breaches of international law and freedom of navigation. Reinvigorated collaboration between governments is urgently needed so that a full maritime security architecture can help bring an end to these attacks against seafarers and shipping operations, wherever necessary.

Eliminating illegal recruitment practices

The demanding of fees or charges by recruitment and placement service providers as a prerequisite for employment is unacceptable and prohibited under the MLC, 2006. Such practices should be eliminated through more robust enforcement of applicable provisions in the MLC, especially in major seafarer supply countries.

Eliminating seafarer abandonment

Abandonment of seafarers is unacceptable and relevant provisions in the MLC, 2006 seek to protect seafarers against this unethical practice. Governments, industry and unions must continue to work together, particularly through the joint ILO-IMO Abandonment Database Task Force, to ensure prompt action when abandonment does unfortunately occur.

Securing 'key worker' status and 'visa-free' travel for seafarers

Regulatory measures that restrict the movement of seafarers – particularly with respect to shore leave, crew change and repatriation – hinder their human rights and wellbeing, as well as their ability to facilitate the flow of world trade. More countries should designate and recognise seafarers as key workers (in line with the MLC, 2006), alongside identifying long-term global solutions to ensure their unhindered movement in connection with their work. This could be achieved through harmonised global rules, eliminating any special permit requirements and allowing visa-free travel (e.g., for transit, crew change and repatriation) for any seafarer.

Collective action and leadership through cross-governmental decision-making

What begins as a technical or security decision in one part of government can quickly become an economic and social problem elsewhere. In the context of shipping, border closures and visa rules can confine crews on board ships for months. Security threats can also expose crews to conflict and danger. These outcomes are rarely intended but their consequences are real, human, and systemic. Measures relating to border management, health emergencies and security – in non-maritime domains – can unintentionally disrupt shipping and harm seafarers. Coordinated, cross-governmental action in all relevant areas is vital to ensure that seafarers can move and work safely.

The functioning of global shipping depends not only on maritime regulation, but on policy and political actions taken across government. When seafarers cannot travel to or from their vessels, the consequences extend far beyond shipping, contributing to supply chain disruption and risks to food, energy and economic security.

The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) calls on political leaders, policymakers and senior public officials, including those outside traditional maritime portfolios, to recognise shipping and seafarers as essential to socio-economic global stability. Protecting shipping and seafarers protects trade, which in turn provides essential goods to societies, making this a shared global responsibility.

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