

FAIRTRADE FOR SEAFARERS

By Mark Dickinson, Assistant General Secretary, Nautilus UK

Fairtrade tea. Fairtrade coffee. Fairtrade chocolate. As consumers we cannot get enough of these “feel good” products. In the UK alone sales of fairtrade products were up by 40% in 2006 alone. Every self-respecting supermarket and supplier is eager to promote their own ethically sound products.

No one in the maritime industry should take issue with the desire to create a better world by ensuring equitable treatment and just rewards for those who produce our food and other staples of our everyday life, but at Nautilus we are concerned that a key element has been excluded from the fair trade equation – seafarers.

Society today is so divorced from the realities of mass production, distribution and transportation that few people appreciate the fact that supermarket shelves don't magically restock themselves each night.

More than 90% of this country's imports and exports come and go by ship. And the sad fact is that far too many of those ships are substandard – as many as 15% according to some statistics. According to the International Commission on Shipping (ICONS), many seafarers are little more than slaves – with life at sea for many crew members involving physical and mental abuse, non-payment of wages, excessive hours of work and atrocious living and working conditions. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has described the way in which the vicious circle of low freight rates, extremely poor conditions and standards, weak national regulatory mechanisms and the general reluctance to enforce internationally applicable labour standards drives a race to the bottom in maritime employment standards.

Two Nautilus UK officials check the living and working conditions of seafarers on ships coming into UK ports. In the past year they have secured over US\$500,000 in unpaid wages for crewmembers including shipmasters. They often met seafarers who are too scared to ask for help for fear of retribution back home. This can range from pressure on other family members, to the taking back of wages recovered, beatings and blacklisting.

In 2006 one Nautilus UK official dealt with a young Filipino officer whose foot was chopped off in an accident onboard his ship. Nautilus offered to assist him with a claim for compensation under the terms of his government endorsed employment contract, but he said he did not wish to take any action against his employer because he had been forced to sign a document before leaving the Philippines saying he would not contact anyone externally for assistance of any kind.

Such cases of abuse of seafarers undermines our industry and in particular provide unfair competition for the majority of shipowners who strive to provide decent conditions for the seafarers they employ.

These considerations were amongst the reasons why, in February 2006, governments, unions and shipowners reached a historic agreement on what has been termed the “bill of rights” for the world’s 1.2 million seafarers.

It is impossible to under-estimate its importance. The ILO’s Maritime Labour Convention 2006 brings a number of new innovative features to ILO standard setting and introduces measures to regulate working conditions in what is probably the world’s most globalised industry.

Nautilus UK members have been living with the harsh realities of globalisation in shipping such as offshoring for decades and they too need the support and protection that the ILO Maritime Labour Convention aims to give. But now we need to ensure that governments around the world ratify and implement the convention. We also need to see that the principles enshrined in the “bill of rights” are properly applied in practice. And that’s where Fairtrade comes in.

Nautilus UK believes it is wrong that people may be buying products with the rosy glow that Fairtrade gives when such products may have been carried on unseaworthy rust buckets with poorly paid, poorly trained and ill treated crews from the third world. It is not good enough that the Fairtrade promise of a fair deal for third world producers results if third world seafarers are being exploited.

That is why Nautilus UK seeks to make sure that the Fairtrade label covers the way in which those products are transported. The ships that carry these goods should as a minimum be covered the ILO Maritime Labour Convention 2006. And it doesn’t stop with Fairtrade. UN agencies seem to have a policy of putting relief cargoes onto vessels operated under ship registries that break the UN Convention on the Law of Sea’s rules requiring a genuine link between the ownership and control of a ship and the flag it flies.

In the UK, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) regularly charters flag of convenience ships for military exercises and operations. Barely one in three of the merchant ships used by the MoD in recent years have been British registered and we have even witnessed the use of ships that have failed basic safety inspections.

Nautilus UK is not criticising Fairtrade but we do want to ensure fair treatment for the seafarers who risk their lives in transporting those goods around the world. Everyone gets to see, in one form or another, the products brought in by ship. But hardly anyone gets to see the seafarers whose job it is to get the produce to the market place. And they certainly do not get to see the conditions of employment and the abuse that many seafarers have to put up with in their everyday working lives.

Nautilus UK therefore believes that IFSMA as the voice of Shipmasters internationally should add its voice to the call for fair treatment and fair trade for seafarers and in doing so support decent shipowners who provide decent living and working conditions for the seafarers they employ.

With that objective in mind the 33rd Annual General Assembly of IFSMA to be held on 24th-25th May 2007 in Antwerp, Belgium is invited to adopt the following motion;

Welcomes the 2006 agreement on an international “Bill of Rights” for the world’s seafarers as the fourth pillar of international regulation of the shipping industry and in particular welcomes the concept of a Maritime Labour Certificate to demonstrate compliance with the MLC standards.

Recognises the intense levels of exploitation within the shipping industry and that seafarers’ working conditions are not presently addressed within the criteria for Fairtrade products and services, even though more than 90% of world trade is moved by ships.

Notes with concern the fact that considerable proportions of aid and relief cargoes are carried by ships registered in flag of convenience countries, which regularly infringe minimum international safety and employment standards.

Urges the ILO to maintain pressure on government to ratify, implement and enforce the provisions of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 as soon as possible.

Furthermore urges UN agencies, charities and relief organisations to use ships that meet international safety and labour standards including those specified in the MLC 2006.

Calls for dialogue between seafarers and Fairtrade groups to ensure that seafarers’ working conditions and shipboard social standards form part of the assessment process for Fairtrade status.