

Mersey Maritime Exchange

25 June 2021

Build Back Fairer

Mark Dickinson

Check against delivery

It's a huge pleasure to speak to you today as we welcome what is a real landmark moment for the maritime industry in Merseyside and the UK.

As someone who grew up not far from the Maritime Hub and ended up embarking on a career at sea, my hope is that this momentous development will inspire the next generation to do the same.

It also gives me great pleasure to address you on the Day of the Seafarer, held each year to recognise the invaluable contribution that seafarers make to international trade and the global economy.

The world's 1.6 million seafarers are among the many heroes of the pandemic.

From PPE and vaccines to energy supplies and the goods on supermarket shelves – it was seafarers who kept the world moving when everything else seemed to stop.

But we must always remember that this contribution came at a huge personal cost to seafarers and their families.

Measures introduced to prevent the disease spreading failed to appreciate the crucial role that the shipping industry and our seafarers play in the global economy.

This had a brutal impact on maritime key workers, with hundreds of thousands trapped at sea for months, sometimes more than a year beyond the end of their contract. Countless others were left out of work and often unable to access the kind of financial support that other workers have benefitted from.

So, as we gather today to consider the progress that we have made against the Maritime 2050 objectives and to think about what comes next – we must not forget about seafarers.

The theme that the IMO has set for Day of the Seafarer this year is a 'fair future for seafarers.' This is timely and it chimes with work that we have been doing at Nautilus

to consider the kind of future that we want to see for seafarers and the maritime sector.

The brutal impact of the pandemic has led to colleagues across the industry questioning whether they want to continue to work in a career which has taken such a profound toll on their financial security and wellbeing.

So, for Nautilus, the answer is clear: any plan to tackle the enduring issues that the industry faces must be built on a foundation of fairness.

We can't just build back better – we need to build back fairer too.

Our new Build Back Fairer campaign sets out five key asks of the government and industry to make this happen.

1. The first of these is to designate seafarers as key workers, globally, immediately and permanently.

Despite the proud role that the UK played in supporting December's UN resolution, just 58 states have so far informed the IMO that they have designated seafarers as key workers.

And even in those states who granted the key worker status – frankly, this sometimes happened in name only.

For instance, we have seen many examples where a lack of coordination between departments meant that this status was simply forgotten when new Covid restrictions were introduced. Seafarers were not given the same exemptions as some other professions.

So along with a permanent keyworker status adopted globally, we also need to secure an agreement on the rights that this will guarantee for seafarers.

The recent statement by the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and the European Community Shipowners' Association (ECSA) should be used as a starting point.

2. Secondly, we need fair workplaces with decent conditions.

While the serious issues that seafarers have faced may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, we know that many have existed for years or even decades.

To give one example, a World Maritime University study this year identified widespread malpractices in the recording of work and rest hours, normalising acute levels of fatigue.

The fact that seafarers routinely work beyond what are already unsustainable working hours represents a ticking time bomb for our industry.

One of the medium term aims of Maritime 2050 is for the UK Government to work with the IMO and ILO to address a range of issues including fatigue, seafarer welfare and modern slavery.

Following the impact of the pandemic, we would urge the government to accelerate this process, and to make progress on these vital issues a short-term priority.

3. Thirdly, if we are genuine about building a better and fairer maritime industry, a frank and open appraisal of the industry's governance and the corrosive effect of flags of convenience is more necessary now than it has ever been.

Flags of convenience have long been an accepted reality in the industry. But when the pandemic hit, the utter inability to of some flags to fulfil their obligations to seafarers on their vessels under international law was brutally exposed.

Maritime 2050 re-emphasises the commitment of the UK government to supporting the UK Ship Register and rightly describes the UK flag as a 'byword for quality'.

If the aspiration to attract more ships to the UK flag and more shipping companies to the UK is to be met, the government must lead the charge internationally to restore confidence in the ship registration system.

And the way to do this is by insisting on a genuine link between the shipowner and the country of registration.

4. Fourthly, we must ensure that the transition to green technology and automation is fair for workers.

The transition to a net-zero maritime sector envisaged in Maritime 2050 must be fair and just.

The focus of the UK government and the maritime industry should be to create high value work, which the current workforce can benefit from.

This should include ensuring that British seafarers and maritime professionals are able to benefit from new job opportunities created in decommissioning.

The UK government also needs to act to ensure that the debate about automation is human-centred.

Rather than considering whether new technology can be used to replace seafarers, the focus should be on looking at how technology can be used to enhance safety, alongside better working and living conditions.

5. Our final ask is for fair access to the quality jobs and training opportunities of the future.

The number of British seafarers has declined by almost two-thirds since the 1980s, and the current gap between numbers due to retire and numbers of new entrants means a further 30% decline can be expected within the next decade.

To tackle this, the government must develop proactive policies to maximise the employment of British seafarers in the UK and to equip them with the skills required to take advantage of future opportunities.

One key measure that would assist in achieving this goal would be to increase investment in the SMarT scheme to cover 100% of the cost of training UK-resident seafarers and require a commitment from employers to guarantee a period of employment on completion of a cadetship.

Another is the firmest possible action against National Minimum Wage breaches and social dumping.

This has been a whistle-stop tour through our vision for the sector and I would urge everyone to read the full detail in our Build Back Fairer report.

Colleagues, the impact of the pandemic has led our industry to a crossroads and the decisions that we take now will determine the path that we are on for the coming decades.

This is the time to rise to that challenge. This is the time to Build Back Fairer.

Thank you.