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Seafarers in a global world: the changing needs of seafarers for advice, support and representation

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Abstract

The work of seafarers has undergone dramatic changes in recent years in response to upheavals in a global industry such as the increased use of 'flags of convenience' and containerisation (ITF, 2006). This has changed the way in which seafarers work and rest, spending less time in port and working with smaller crews, often containing a wide mix of nationalities. This paper explores the needs of seafarers in a rapidly changing global industry, and in particular the means by which they gain information, support and advice for both workplace problems and their wider needs in relation to health and welfare that are specific to workers who spend large parts of their working lives away from home.

Seafarers were defined in this research as those who work or have worked in any role within the maritime industries, including the Merchant Navy, the UK fishing fleet and the Royal Naval Service. Only seafarers of working age were included, defined as those up to the age of 62 (the normal retirement age for the industry). The research mainly involved UK-based seafarers, but also included some non-UK seafarers visiting UK ports.

Key words: advice and information; health; maritime industry; seafarers;

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Introduction and background

As an island, historically the UK has relied on its maritime industry for both military and civilian uses. But seafaring, once a career of choice for many young workers, is in decline. Today around 70,000 individuals are employed within the seafaring industries and this number is predicted to decline substantially within the next 20 years. The industry has diminished in size accompanied by considerable structural change, from the introduction of containerisation (cargo is increasingly transported in containers rather than as loose items) in the 1960s/70s through to the adoption of flags of convenience by major shipping companies, as a means of both employing workers on poorer terms and conditions and also to avoid national laws that might otherwise restrict their activities. Seafaring is now not only a hazardous occupation, but is conducted in an environment of greater casualisation and precarious work. Seafarers face a range of specific problems that other workers do not, such as separation from home and family, inability to maintain shore-based routines, intense proximity to work colleagues, limited opportunities to have time away from work, and a hazardous working environment in which accidents and mortality rates are high (Roberts, 2000). In response, there is a well-established network of maritime charities and organisations providing support and advice through, for example, Seafarers' Centres and Missions in ports around the world. National trade unions and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) are also well organised in the merchant navy.

Commercial pressures, combined with changes in the industry such as containerisation mean that the time ships spend in port is considerably less than it was, with a 1998 study of a medium-sized UK port showing that seven out of 10 ships turned around within 24 hours, compared to only 11% that did so in 1970 (ILO: 2004: 104). Such a dramatic reduction in turnaround times, together with the amount of work that needs to be undertaken in port, including dealing with cargo, visitors and inspectors, means that it is often difficult, or impossible, for crew to go ashore. Furthermore, the move away from ports close to city centres to developments far from residential and shopping areas, often without public transport links, adds to the difficulties of going ashore and limits the possibilities of social contact beyond the shipboard community. There is increasing concern that lack of shore leave is having a detrimental affect on the physical and mental health of seafarers, and contributing to isolation, fatigue, depression and stress (ILO, 2004: 107). Around one in five seafarers worldwide believe that workloads have increased in the last five years, according to the ITF (1996) survey, although 62% remained satisfied with their workload. Crews of passenger vessels feel the most overworked, reporting levels of dissatisfaction of 10 percentage points above the average (ITF, 1996: 53) while UK seafarers reported the highest levels of dissatisfaction, with 60% saying there had been a deterioration (ITF, 1996: 53).

In consequence of these changes, this paper explores the working lives of seafarers, in circumstances where working patterns are more fragmented; where seafaring communities are more dispersed; and where the strains of

more fragile contractual relationships impact on their ways of seeking support and advice.

Methodology

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods: a survey of over 800 members of the merchant navy carried out through the UK trade unions Nautilus UK and the RMT; a survey of 63 members of the UK fishing fleet distributed through the Fishermen's Mission; a survey of over 500 users of the Dreadnought Medical Service¹; 20 in-depth interviews, plus a consultation meeting, with key respondents in the maritime industry, including the maritime charities, trade unions, employers and a maritime training college; 90 in-depth interviews with seafarers aged under 62, who either have worked or are currently working in the fishing fleet, the merchant navy or the Royal Navy; and a focus group with four merchant navy officer cadets.

Of the 94 individual seafarers and cadets participating in in-depth interviews and a focus group, 77% had been born in the UK, another 10% were born in other EU countries (Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal and the Ukraine), a further 10% were from the Philippines and there were one each who had been born in Australia, India, Pakistan and Sudan. So while the sample is dominated by UK seafarers, it contains a typical mix of the particular nationalities that commonly work in UK seafaring and reflects the global predominance of seafarers from the Philippines (Glen, 2005).

Working conditions at sea

A report for the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) by MORI in 1996 surveyed 6,500 seafarers employed on vessels registered in 93 different countries (ITF, 1996). The largest proportion (45 per cent) was employed through a private manning agent, with just over a third (34 per cent) employed directly by the ship owner or manager. Directly employed staff were more likely to be officers, and consequently for ratings, employment through agencies is predominant. Seafarers from EU countries have shorter periods at sea without a break but worldwide, the most common relief system is five months on and one month off (with pay), while a significant minority (43 per cent) have no relief system with paid leave (ITF, 1996: 20). The interviews that we undertook also showed different patterns of time at sea dependent on the nationality of the seafarer. Seafarers work under specific conditions with particular dangers and in a global industry, in which only one third of crews are made up of a single nationality (ILO, 2004: 2).

The qualitative interviews we undertook found that seafarers were generally very positive about the benefits of working at sea, describing the opportunity to travel, the camaraderie among colleagues and the autonomy or freedom offered by the job as the best things about it. The friendships formed and reliance on colleagues was a significant feature of the job, and some thought that the job taught tolerance of other people and situations. But the negative aspects of the job were equally strongly felt, with separation from home and family being the worst element for nearly all. Bad weather and its associated

¹ a priority medical service for seafarers to assist them in returning to work at sea operated through the National Health Service and supported by the Seaman's Hospital Society

dangers was also a negative aspect, together with long hours, fatigue and tiredness and poor pay or terms and conditions.

Long and unsociable working hours

There is no doubt that seafarers work long hours. The ITF survey found that only a quarter have an average working day of eight hours or less, whereas 62% work between eight and 12 hours a day, 11% work between 12 and 18 hours daily and 3% over 18 hours. Senior staff works longer hours, with 21% of Senior Deck Officers working more than 12 hours. Workload is one of the causes of greatest dissatisfaction among UK officers, with a majority believing that conditions have declined in last decade, particularly in relation to workload, fatigue, stress, working hours and morale (NUMAST, 2002: 8) and there is also evidence that excessive working hours are under-recorded, due to falsification of records (Smith et al, 2006)

In the interviews with merchant seafarers, sea hours were reported as long, with 12 hours on duty being common. Seafarers spoke of broken sleep patterns and of patterns of long working days, over a significant period of time without a day off. Fatigue was also mentioned as a very significant issue. Similarly the quantitative survey found that fatigue/working hours was the biggest concern for survey respondents during their working life, with 58.5% saying it was an issue for them. Officers registered it as a greater concern, with 60.5 per cent stating it was a worry, compared to 51.7 per cent of ratings. For fishermen too, days at sea are normally long. The surveys found that for this group too fatigue/working hours was the biggest concern with 54 per cent selecting it as an issue for them.

Linked to working hours is the issue of the time seafarers have on shore during their work trip. There is widespread dissatisfaction at the length of shore leave, with seafarers complaining that they have little or no time on shore (ITF, 1996: 55). This is due a combination of circumstances including: shorter turnarounds; tightening security following the events of 9/11 and the continuing need for seafarers to continue their work on ship while it is in port. Interviewees for this research reported that when they did go ashore they were most likely to visit the seafarers' centres or mission, which in some cases also provided Internet access – a prime concern was normally to contact home. The short turnaround times in port these days were contrasted with the past by many former seafarers, for whom time in port was part of the attraction of the job. Seafarers spoke of days when they would have docked for around 10 days, allowing five days' leave and five days' work.

A prevalence of low pay

NUMAST's 2002 survey of members found wide variations in pay, with the worst paid masters and officers receiving as little as one third of the salaries of the highest paid in their rank (NUMAST, 2002: 6). The ITF survey also found great variations in pay for seafarers worldwide (ITF, 2006:27-28). But while European seafarers may be better paid, not all those working on vessels of European flag states were paid well. In fact, vessels carrying European flags had the highest percentage of low-paid workers in the 1996 survey, with

Greek flags, for example, having 26 per cent of the crew earning below US\$500, considerably below the ILO minimum wage of US\$893 at the time (ITF, 1996: 28-29). This highlights the pay variations that occur on the same ship for seafarers of different nationalities.

Based on our interviews with seafarers and on the survey data, it appears that many seafarers working from UK ports survive on low incomes, with one in three having an income of under £10,000 a year and over two-thirds having salaries of under £30,000. Within the UK seafaring sector it is fishermen whose pay situation is least satisfactory, with many reporting real falls in income in recent years. Despite these low levels of pay, some non-UK seafarers considered their pay relatively good, in comparison to what they could have earned in their countries of origin and it was the prevalence of low wages or high levels of unemployment (or a combination of the two) that had driven them towards seafaring, despite the hazards, the long working hours and the length of time they had to spend at sea. UK ratings were less satisfied than were officers with the pay they could earn and this was particularly the case for those with families. Of those whom we interviewed who had left seafaring, several gave marriage or the wish to start a family as the reason for leaving, reflecting the difficulties of maintaining family life while working at sea.

Long term implications of the job

Research has shown that working at sea is one of the most hazardous occupations, presenting specific health and safety concerns for seafarers that are often long term, including:

- high death rates for accidents at work in the merchant fleet (between seven and 20 times greater than for shore-based workers even in the safest national fleets) (Roberts, 2000);
- high mortality from cancers, cirrhosis, pancreatic and other alcohol-related diseases were found among British merchant seafarers (ILO, 2004);
- exposure to toxic and carcinogenic materials that is responsible for many chronic illnesses (ILO, 2004);
- physical hazards on board ship include noise, vibration, excessive heat and cold and harmful radiation from the sun; and seafarers are particularly prone to back injuries, affected by the motion of the ship (ILO, 2004);
- mental health problems can arise, related to the conditions of onboard life, as well as prolonged absence from home, and high levels of stress have been reported, associated with poor sleep quality, noise and workload (ILO, 2004);
- obesity has been identified as a problem for UK seafarers, and traditionally there have been limited opportunities for merchant navy personnel to take part in physical activity, as well as a social life revolving around the bar in the past (Leonard, 2003);
- fatal accident rates among UK deep-sea trawlermen were found to be 20 times greater than for coal miners by one study (Matheson et al, 2001)
- less is known about the levels of occupational illness among fishermen, who have no mandatory health screening, but common illnesses identified include: gastrointestinal, respiratory and skin diseases, psychiatric or

neurological conditions, with acute depression the most common, and some were alcohol-related (Matheson et al, 2001).

There were many physical and psychosocial hazards of working at sea described by the seafarers interviewed, several of which had long-term effects that placed limitations on their lives after leaving the sea. Some recent trends in seafaring, such as the reduction in crew size and strict no-alcohol policies, were also thought to be affecting seafarers' health and safety.

Health problems

Among physical hazards mentioned were accidents, in the worst cases leading to deaths of colleagues, but more commonly damage to limbs, with several fishermen recalling incidents when colleagues had lost parts of fingers through catching them in fishing nets. Accidents or minor injuries, particularly trips, falls, cuts and burns, were viewed as commonplace by some seafarers, or an "inevitable part of the job" when the sea was rough. Some, though, thought that long working hours and less training had increased the risk of accidents. Musculo-skeletal problems were mentioned by all types of seafarers, such as back pain, joint and knee problems and hernias. Several interviewees had problems with arthritis, which they attributed to the movement of the ship and the damp working conditions. Added to these health problems is the fact that appropriate healthcare is not always immediately available and, particularly for more minor injuries or health complaints, seafarers would have to wait until they had reached the next port before they could obtain appropriate treatment. Other physical hazards reported by interviewees included: noise (particularly in engine rooms; loss of circulation to the hands (said to be common among fishermen); going from a cold country to a hot one; prolonged exposure to artificial light affecting eyesight; asbestos; radiation and chemical hazards. Other ailments included problems with hearing and balance and with cataracts or sight loss. Some also had had accidents that had seriously affected, or in some cases ended, their seagoing career.

Some seafarers had been exposed in the past to hazards now recognised as having severe consequences, for example, through the transporting of dangerous chemicals or fabrics such as asbestos or indeed through exposure to radiation. Their situation reflects the dangerous environment in which UK seafarers work and points to the lack of a longer-term strategy aimed at reducing or eliminating such risks.

There was a consensus among most interviewees that seafaring was not a healthy way of life, with the main lifestyle hazards being: alcohol, smoking, drugs, lack of exercise and poor fitness, poor diet, isolation, loneliness and boredom. Some cited stress as a significant problem. Alcohol was mentioned by a great number of interviewees when asked about health risks of their occupation. Some saw it as part of the seafaring lifestyle and culture, while others felt that people drank to overcome homesickness and loneliness. In some cases the tendency towards unhealthy lifestyles at sea had been a motivation in their decision to give up seafaring. Others, however, felt that the commonly held view of seafarers as heavy drinkers was unfair, believing them

to be no worse than much of the population. Clearly, though, attitudes towards drinking at sea have changed drastically since the days when the Royal Navy handed out a daily tot of rum to all seafarers. Many felt that alcohol might still be an issue for the older seafarers, but less so for younger staff. And employer attitudes to drinking have hardened, with many having a “zero-tolerance” policy towards alcohol and drugs. Among employers interviewed, policies on alcohol were strict, with seafarers knowing that a breach of the rules meant immediate dismissal. A more sympathetic approach was only taken where the employee approached the company first saying that they had an alcohol problem and needed help. Random testing for alcohol and drugs also took place and there was a view that the tightening up of alcohol was related to insurance issues, rather than to the safeguarding of seafarer health. Some interviewees felt that the random drug and alcohol testing introduced by some companies was too strict and there was a view that some good seafarers had been forced to leave the job because of overly strict drug testing that identified small amounts of cannabis taken while off duty, but still remaining in the blood stream once back at work. In addition several seafarers saw a downside to strict alcohol policies, which had meant the closure of ship bars and therefore reduced the opportunities for socialising, as leading to isolation and mental health problems.

“In the deep sea the only way to socialise is through drinking. Nowadays, after the new 'no-alcohol policy', nobody socialises, they just go to their cabins and watch their satellite TVs.”
(UK navy officer)

Other health-related issues referred to include smoking, which had in the past been promoted through access to cheap cigarettes, and more recently a worsening diet, as a consequence of the cutting back of in-ship catering. Seafarers also acknowledged that there were limited opportunities to exercise while on board ship and that increased mechanisation had meant that while the jobs were less physically demanding, they were also less physically beneficial.

But, in addition to these physical hazards, many of the seafarers interviewed spoke of the psychosocial hazards of working at sea. These included loneliness, isolation from both family, friends and work colleagues, and boredom. Increased levels of stress were associated with reductions in crew size and the related increase in workload. The interviewees, and in particular non-UK seafarers, also referred to bullying at work, which had affected their mental health.

Difficulties leaving sea and adjusting to shore-based life

All seafarers know that the time will come when they will have to leave the sea. For some this can be planned for in advance and seafarers may be able to establish a route for successful adjustment to shore-based life. Life on shore might be anticipated on marriage; where opportunities for better paid work existed on shore; and of course on retirement. But our research shows that often it is not possible to plan for a new shore-based life and that the changes consequent upon this impose real challenges for seafarers. Life on shore has different rhythms and demands and seafarers often spoke of having experienced real difficulties in adjusting. This was particularly the case

where ill-health (mainly accidents and musculo-skeletal problems) had caused individuals to leave seafaring. One in six of those interviewed had been medically retired and this was the most likely reason for ending their career at sea.

Maintaining family relationships during periods of absence and on return

Research shows that prolonged absence from home causes problems in maintaining family relationships and that relationship breakdowns may be higher for seafarers (Thomas 2003). Our research points to family and relationship issues as a key concern for seafarers and additionally we observed that many of those interviewed had divorced or were living on their own or living with second families. The interviewees spoke of particular needs for family support in maintaining contact with families when at sea; in creating rosters which were 'family friendly' by allowing seafarers regular time with their families; and in assisting them in coping with family illnesses or other family crisis, made more acute due to the absence of the seafarer. Employers, in particular, were identified as needing to do more to support seafaring families through measures to address these issues. Seafaring also had other consequences, for example, the fact that a family member was away, made it more difficult for a remaining parent to take paid work outside the home and this had consequences for household incomes. We observed that a significant number of interviewees were childless and some said that being at sea had contributed to delays in forming permanent relationships, until such time as they were shore-based again. Family breakdown could also occur at the time when the seafarer returned to a life on shore, to live within a family unit that had organised itself, to some extent, around the absence of the seafarer and which inevitably was 'disrupted' by the re-insertion of the seafarer within the household. It was commented upon that newer technologies, in particular the Internet and mobile phones, had the potential to assist in sustaining seafaring families during periods of seafarer absence.

Non-UK seafarers expressed similar concerns regarding the maintenance of family relationships while at sea, and faced particular difficulties as they tended to have longer tours of duty than the UK seafarers interviewed. Generally they also had greater financial obligations towards extended families and were supporting a greater number of people at home. Even those who were single had greater financial responsibilities towards their families than did their UK counterparts.

Accessing accommodation in a rising property market

Several studies have investigated homelessness among ex-service personnel, including seafarers (Ballintyne and Hanks, 2000; Dandeker et al, 2005; and Lemos and Durkacz, 2005). Particularly for those who are living on their own, research has found a preference for housing specifically for seafarers (Sixsmith, 1997). However, we found that many seafarers whose accommodation provision was unsatisfactory were unaware of the existence of seafarer housing and had no knowledge of how they might access this. Within our sample, though, the majority of interviewees were owner-occupiers and were in accommodation that they judged as suitable for their needs. But, according to the quantitative surveys, ratings have much higher levels of

concern about accommodation than officers. And this is particularly the case for younger workers as well as for fishermen. Concerns about housing were therefore directly related to lower levels of income, as well as to family breakdown, which itself was also often accompanied by financial difficulties.

There was a view that family relationships were more likely to be preserved where seafarer families were able to live within traditional seafaring communities. These environments were viewed as being more likely to offer support and sustenance, particularly during periods when seafarers were at sea. However, changes to property markets and, in particular, the desirability of housing by the sea, meant that seafarers were finding it more difficult to obtain housing within these traditional centres of seafaring life. As a result households were more widely dispersed and support mechanisms were less evident.

Dealing with poverty and debt

We noted that debt was often an issue for seafarers and our survey found that around one in eight ratings had sought advice about debt or money issues. Seafarers were more likely to have experienced money problems when they were young and earning lower wages or where personal problems, for example ill-health, alcohol-related problems and disability, had affected their ability to continue working. Debts and money problems were often associated with early periods at sea, but also with a period in their lives when they were considering entering into long-term relationships. Debt was sometimes expressed as a consequence of lifestyle choices, again particularly for young seafarers. Patterns of spending were geared to periods on shore, when wages were paid out and some interviewees admitted that they wanted to make up for the months when they were at sea and unable to spend. In these conditions and with credit readily available, getting into debt was not difficult. But debt was also a feature of the lives of fishermen, of whom one in three (35 per cent) had sought money and debt advice, due to the fluctuation of their earnings which were dependent on the catch and time of year and as a result of their self-employment. Non-UK seafarers experienced what they described as 'cycles of debt', as in between seafaring contracts they would often need to borrow money to survive and then would have to use their next earnings to pay back the debt. In their case, however, they were less likely to relate debt to family breakdown, than was the case for UK seafarers.

Organisations of advice, support and solidarity

The UK has a history of providing welfare support to seafarers through long-established organisations tracing their origins back several hundred years. The term welfare is used widely to refer to a broad range of support provided to seafarers and their dependants that can include health, social and financial support, as well as advice and information. At least 150 maritime charities provide support to serving and former seafarers, their dependants, maritime trainees and cadets and organisations that support young people in maritime youth groups or training. Most of these charities assist seafarers who are normally resident in the UK. Some support the welfare of particular groups of seafarers, often in local areas or communities. Some support serving seafarers of all nationalities when in the UK, and others support serving

seafarers of all nationalities in ports worldwide. There is also an International Committee on Seafarers' Welfare (ICSW), formed in 1981 that has 38 members made up of representatives of ship owners and seafarers and the various agencies providing welfare services to seafarers. The ICSW aims to co-ordinate at international level the various organisations involved in providing seafarers' welfare facilities at sea and in port and regularly participates in ILO activities and meetings at which seafarers' welfare is discussed. Within the UK there is a network of 16 Port Welfare Committees (PWCs) providing "a forum in which representatives of all those organizations concerned with the welfare of seafarers visiting and residing within their ports can meet on a regular basis" (ICSW, 2006: 1). The PWCs have a particularly important role in servicing the needs of non-UK seafarers while in the UK and also respond to the needs of those who are no longer at sea, but who have particular needs, be they financial or social. There is also a system of ship visitors who meet with seafarers when ships dock. One aspect of the charitable work undertaken in the UK is that it is sometimes related to religious organisations, as historically it was they who took up the issue of seafarer needs on shore.

The seafaring charities have also provided support for healthcare needs for seafarers since it was recognised that illness and time away from work was particularly problematic for those whose jobs were linked to their ability to go to sea at the time when their ship required them. Thus from 1821 the Seamen's Hospital Society (SHS) has provided medical care to seafarers through a variety of seamen's hospitals and health services, including at one time three ships moored on the River Thames, one of which, the Dreadnought, gave its name to the Dreadnought Medical Service. The service is currently run by the NHS and located within Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust in London. It provides priority primary healthcare for seafarers, including the fishing and merchant fleets. Additionally there is a Seafarers' Benefits Advice Line (SBAL) operated by the Greenwich Citizens Advice Bureau in London and funded by the Seamen's Hospital Society. In common with other CABx it offers free and confidential advice, but can also provide this by telephone, email, post or fax to meet the needs of merchant seafarers, fishermen and their immediate families.

Our survey of seafarers found that nearly four in 10 merchant navy respondents had sought help and advice on a range of both workplace and personal issues. However, from the survey and the interviews we conclude that there are wide differences in where information is sought and from where it is actually obtained. Merchant navy respondents said that they sought advice principally from the trade unions, reflecting their relatively high levels of union membership. However, when asked where they had obtained the information they needed, they were more likely to say that they had found out for themselves. Similarly, fishermen stated that they sought advice from the seafaring charities but again claimed that they had obtained the information they needed through their own networks of family and friends. The research suggests that these responses are premised on three characteristics of seafarers' lives which make them reluctant to accept advice from outside their own environments, based on:

- A strong culture of self-reliance;
- A transfer of information primarily through word of mouth; and
- A reliance on informal methods of problem solving.

In the interviews a general view was expressed that the 'outside world' did not understand the lives of seafarers and therefore fundamentally was ill-equipped to provide the advice and support that seafarers needed. Respondents referred to their experiences in dealing with organisations like JobcentrePlus, stating that the advice and assistance that they offered was premised on a concept of standard employment that did not reflect the working patterns of seafarers. For non-UK seafarers the problems of where to seek advice were compounded by their limited knowledge of the information bodies that existed and by the fact that they generally spent little time in the UK. Differences in the length of rosters by national group also made it more difficult for crews to build up the kind of internal solidarity networks required to circulate information and advice.

The trade unions, principally Nautilus and the RMT negotiate on behalf of UK seafarers. However, recent trends in the industry have placed increased pressure on seafarers who work within smaller crews, are expected to do more work and have less time in port to rest and relax. Such industry pressures appear to have impacted on seafarers' views of the effectiveness of collective action and in particular of trade unions. Our research found that while trade unions had retained high levels of membership in the merchant navy (although in general they do not cover the fishing fleet or Royal Navy²), many of the seafarers whom we interviewed were reluctant to approach unions for support, often believing that unions were not powerful enough to protect them and this was the case even for those who were themselves trade union members. Unions were commonly cited as a source of information about health and welfare services, suggesting that unions were not seen as instrumental in setting terms and conditions at work, but were seen as bodies offering support that was work-related to individual seafarers. We did find a high level of awareness, particularly among non-UK seafarers, of the ITF and its representatives and inspectors, although at the same time a fear was expressed by some interviewees that if they were known to have contacted the ITF, this could lead to them being denied future work by crewing agents, a consequence of the system of employment on a contract for the voyage only, rather than on a permanent contract.

This meant that when it came to resolving workplace problems, respondents stated that these were generally resolved among the crew itself or were referred to a supervisor (skipper or captain) to take a decision. These informal methods did not always lead to problems being satisfactorily resolved and the acceptance of a final arbitrator (such as the skipper or captain) meant that there was no procedure to review or reverse decisions. Respondents primarily felt that whether these informal methods of dispute resolution worked or not depended on the quality of relationships between crew and captain, and these

² Many UK fishers are self-employed and not unionised, and members of the UK armed forces are not permitted to be trade union members

were sometimes identified as being dependent on the 'character' of the captain. This was particularly the view of non-UK seafarers who were often highly dependent on the establishment of relationships of trust between captain and crew.

Conclusions

The paper suggests that both charitable organisations and trade unions need to find new ways of working to respond to the increasingly global nature of the industry, both in operating more closely with other organisations and in finding new ways of reaching out to seafarers. The fundamental changes that have taken place within the industry, in particular the re-flagging of ships, demands new responses. The recent creation of Nautilus, a merger of the UK seafaring trade union NUMAST and the Dutch union FWZ, may provide a basis for a new method of organisation that is capable of responding to these global challenges. The case of *International Transport Workers' Federation and the Finnish Seamen's Union v Viking Line ABP and OU Viking Line Eesti*, which will be heard in the European Court of Justice later this year, will determine the extent to which trade unions are allowed to respond collectively to challenges from employers to existing terms and conditions, through the replacement of existing crews with new crews on poorer pay and conditions and through the reflagging of ships. The case, whichever way it goes, will represent a landmark, either in enabling trade unions to organise within this changing situation or in setting employers loose to determine terms and conditions in a fragmented and casualised industry.

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