

# Shipping corrodes basic rights in free trade's name

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More than 2 000 seafarers will die in accidents this year. Some will simply disappear. Many, after months at sea, will be dumped ashore with little or no pay and after having endured sparse rations and often rotten food.

That is the reality for thousands of seafarers in an industry that is at the forefront of globalisation and free trade. It has been described, with justification, as modern slavery.

"Shipping was the world's first globalised industry, where a combination of laissez fair economics and all that goes with it has undermined the basic rights of a vulnerable workforce," says Sam Dawson of the London-based International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

It was the ITF that organised the protest by seafarers to US consulates and parliament last week. It was part of an international day of protest focused on new US visa regulations that will make it more difficult for seafarers to go ashore in US ports.

This is but one aspect of what is widely perceived by labour as a renewed and concerted attack on trade unionism. Using the excuse of the 9/11 attacks, governments have been eroding civil and trade union rights.

The new international ship and port facility security code makes allowance for access of unions to seafarers. But some countries, including the US, have not ratified it.

Instead, many governments and port authorities are making it more difficult for exploited seafarers to get help. This help usually comes in the form of one of the tiny group of 114 ITF inspectors around the world. They are often the only hope for seafarers prepared to fight brave but often losing battles for the most elementary of rights.

ITF inspectors are seafarers' champions in a grossly uneven war against avaricious ship owners, acquiescent shippers and governments blinded by a desperate desire to top up state coffers through trade.

"But we still manage to get aboard and provide help where it is requested," says Durban-based Sprite Zungu, one of two ITF inspectors in Africa.

Zungu has become something of a legend for winning rights, but he is under no illusions. A victory gained in a South African port may guarantee years or a lifetime of unemployment.

"There is an international blacklist, and many of those who fight for their rights never work again."

This is made stark in a documentary, *Turbulent Waters*, which had its first screening at the Three Continents film festival last month. ITF sources say there are about 10 000 jobless seafarers in the Philippines alone, many illegally blacklisted for demanding basic rights.

The collapse of the former Soviet Union has brought thousands of Ukrainian seafarers on to an overcrowded market, where many ships owned by European and US companies sail under flags of convenience of countries such as Panama or Liberia.

Dawson says: "The Liberian shipping register allows businessmen ... to use the national flag of a lawless and chaotic nation to make money and at the same time guarantee secrecy and non-accountability."

But in the name of free trade, governments have refused to act against this practice, even when their own citizens are grossly exploited.

"It really is a race to the bottom as far as wages and working conditions are concerned; it is the best way to increase profitability," says film maker Malcolm Guy. He and co-director Michelle Smith took five years to make *Turbulent Waters*, travelling mainly between the Philippines, South Africa and North America.

Zungu admits that conditions have become progressively worse as the legions of unemployed accept lower pay and worse conditions to survive. "But that is why we cannot give up. We must just struggle harder."

That might, for a change, make the waters rather more turbulent for ship owners.