



A new “bill of rights” for the maritime sector: A model for fair globalization

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GENEVA – When the International Labour Organization adopted a “bill of rights” for the world’s maritime workers this February, all concerned – governments, seafarers and shipowners – hailed this new labour standard as a landmark development for the world’s most globalized sector.

The Maritime Labour Convention 2006 covers a sector that has become a driving force of globalization, increasing productivity and demand over the past decades and moving 90 per cent of world trade. And by setting solid and uniform rules for the workers, employers and governments involved in commerce at sea, it provides a model for tackling the most pressing globalization challenges of our time.

The maritime industry is a highly specific, emblematic element of the global economy. Until recently, the labour standards that affected this sector had been fragmented, both in content and application. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) had taken important steps to build protections in the areas of safety, certification and pollution, but the sector was awash in a wide range of international labour standards going back over eight decades.

The new ILO Convention modernizes these standards to:

- Consolidate and update more than 68 earlier ILO Conventions and Recommendations;
- set minimum requirements for seafarers to work on a ship;
- address conditions of employment, accommodation, recreational facilities, food and catering, health protection, medical care, welfare and social security protection;
- promote compliance by operators and owners of ships by giving governments sufficient flexibility to implement its requirements in a manner best adapted to their individual laws and practices; and
- strengthen enforcement mechanisms at all levels, including provisions for complaint procedures available to seafarers, the shipowners’ and shipmasters’ supervision of conditions on their ships, the flag States’ jurisdiction and control over their ships, and port state inspections of foreign ships.

All this is new. What is more, this standard also recognizes that in today’s maritime sector, quality work and quality shipping go hand in hand. This exceptional vision and capacity for social dialogue among seafarer and shipowner organizations has thus helped build the foundation for an

innovative approach to social policy that represents a pioneering contribution to making globalization fair.

How does it achieve this? First, by providing a necessary balance between labour standards and regulations needed in the sector with the promotion of productivity and competitiveness. Such balance is essential today across the globalized world. It is not an “either/or” proposition, but one that provides both fairness and efficiency in a diverse and changing sector.

Second, it is the first major comprehensive set of global labour standards to be adopted without the opposition of any of its tripartite stakeholders – in this case, representatives of seafarers, shipowners and governments. Of the more than 300 delegates attending the recent ILO Maritime Conference, not one voted against the Convention.

Third, the Convention contains common sense and viable provisions for its own enforcement. No longer will seafarers or shipowners face a bewildering array of national laws subject to differing international labour standards. Under its provisions, for the first time in history, there will be a truly global foundation available for the various national laws in the maritime labour sector.

Fourth and finally, this Convention shows that the human capacity, intelligence and political will, exists to find balanced solutions to help make globalization fair. Other globalized sectors face similar challenges. Governments are trying to manage and develop national economies and specific sectors while dealing with the demands of adjustments to financial and trade liberalization. Businesses are struggling to succeed, grow and survive in the face of intensifying competition in domestic, regional and global markets. And workers often feel they are at the receiving end of these tensions.

In the search for a way forward it has become more and more evident that there can be no lasting success with purely national solutions to global problems. Nor will we find the right solutions without dialogue among the key parties.

It is incumbent upon policymakers to rapidly move forward with the ratification of this new standard. I wish to make a call to all Heads of State and Government and to Speakers of national parliaments to place the ratification of the Maritime Labour Convention on their priority list. Together they can make it happen quickly.

The sooner we have the necessary ratifications (30 countries representing 33 per cent of world tonnage), the sooner it will come into force and the sooner we can confirm the Maritime Labour Convention’s role as a harbinger of a new era in our globalized world – one in which workers, employers and government came together to produce an international instrument that benefits us all.

This is just the beginning. History will one day record that dialogue could address not only the challenges of living, working and conducting business at sea – but provide a new paradigm for dealing with the challenges of a fair globalization as well.

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