MANILA (ILO Online) - On the wide sidewalk of T.M. Kalaw, a busy thoroughfare near Manila's port area, several dozen out-of-work seafarers and shipping company representatives meet in an informal but highly efficient labour mart.

The experiences of the market's high and low end - officers and ratings - differ markedly. They also provide an accurate barometer of changes at the global level, for the Philippines archipelago supplies 20 per cent of the world's seafarers.

Experienced rating Edgar Salcedo is a bosun (or deck supervisor) who has been coming to T.M. Kalaw every day since his last job, on a Japanese oil tanker, ended nearly four months ago. He frets because he has been told that some companies have imposed an age limit of 45 on his position and that, at 47, he is now too old.

A native of the southern island of Mindanao, where he has a wife and three children, Salcedo has to pay for board and lodging in Manila while he waits for work. Although he was paid US$1,450 a month on his last job, he says he would accept a lower wage - "but not less than US$1,000." Somewhat plaintively, he adds, "As an older man, I can teach the younger crew."

In contrast, Elmer Perlado, an officer (second mate), has been out of work for a month but is much more confident of employment. Also 47, and a father of five from Negros, Perlado came close to snagging one job paying US$2,700 a month and says it's only a matter of time before he gets a good offer.

As today's ships become more specialized and automated, the required skills mix has changed. Demand for skilled deck officers and engineers continues to rise, while slimmer crews means the need for lesser skilled ratings is dropping. The trends are confirmed by the The Baltic and International Maritime Council's (BIMCO) ISF manpower report (December 2005), which estimates a worldwide shortage of 10,000 qualified officers and a surplus of 135,000 ratings.

"The Filipino is much in demand for operational and management positions, but if he is unskilled, there is a difficulty", sums up Captain Emmanuel Regio, President of the Philippine Association of Manning Agencies and Shipmanagers.

As well as shrinking overall demand, the major threat to Filipino ratings comes from the lower-priced competition from Asian neighbors such as China, India, Myanmar and Viet Nam - just as Filipino ratings squeezed out their European and American counterparts a while back.

"The benchmark monthly wage for Filipino ratings is US$1,400", says Captain Gregorio Oca, president of the powerful trade union, the Associated Marine Officers' and Seaman's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP), which recently completed negotiations with several international shipowners.

But Oca concedes the figure doesn't mean that much when other countries offer half that wage or less. "I won't name names, but seamen in some countries are accepting US$500 or US$700 a month", says Oca. "What can we do? We are at the mercy of the shipowners."

He also concedes that shipowners are increasingly imposing age restrictions - sometimes as low as 40 - for certain categories of work.

"Shipowners can afford to be choosy", he notes. "They want strong young men and they want to reduce the risks of hiring seafarers who might become ill, which costs money."

But for some shipowners, wage costs are not the only factor in recruiting ratings.

Sverre Rognvik, the Manila representative for Wallenius Wilhelmsen, Norway's biggest shipping line, has been working with Filipinos seafarers for over two decades. "Filipino seamen are well trained and are known all over the world for their reliability", he says. "Even in the United States, if you say you have a Filipino crew, they say: No problem."

Rognvik knows international shipowners who switched to cheaper crews but changed back again after accidents caused at least in part by the crew's poor English and inexperience.

"Of course, you will pay more money for an experienced rating on a chemical tanker, for example, because if you have an accident or oil spillage through inexperience it will cost you a lot of money", he says.

This is why higher wages notwithstanding, Filipino ratings are still employed in large numbers. According to the Philippine Overseas and Employment Administration (POEA), the number of Filipinos deployed at sea in early December 2005 totaled 236,431, a 9.3 per cent rise over the year earlier. Of these, 72.2 per cent were ratings, 8.7 per cent senior officers and 19.1 per cent junior officers.

Carolina de Leon, a POEA director says many shipowners still prefer Filipinos "because they speak English and are western-oriented, flexible and have a caring attitude".

To be sure, the Filipino seaman is also a valuable source of revenue for the country. Central Bank figures show they sent home US$1.2 billion, or 16 per cent of total remittances, for the first nine months of 2005.

In recognition of this, the Government tries to assist its mariners in various ways, says de Leon. Since 2003, POEA has set up a "one stop shop" for easier and speedier processing of documents that are handled by over a dozen government agencies. POEA is also preparing new identification cards with biometric features as an anti-terrorist measure. In addition, it plans to make social security coverage, which is currently voluntary, mandatory for seamen.

With China trade spurring the current boom in shipbuilding - one major Japanese shipping line plans to add 282 new vessels over the next five years - the demand for skilled officers - both on deck and in the engine room - continues to be robust worldwide. BIMCO estimates the current officer shortage will increase to over 25,000 by 2011.

"Look at the bulletin board in the hall to see how many companies are looking for specialist officers", says AMOSUP's Captain Oca in the Seamen's Center in Manila.

"We can't get second mates or second engineers anyway", says Wilhelmsen's Rognvit. "It's a worldwide problem."

With fewer young men keen to make the sea their living, particularly in the developed world, the new ILO Convention will also help to make the profession more attractive. Issues that are addressed in the Convention include concerns central to securing conditions of "decent work" for seafarers such as the minimum age for work onboard ships, hours of work, occupational safety and health protection, standards for accommodation and catering, access to medical care, repatriation, labour inspections and social security.

"The Convention will contain a comprehensive set of global standards promoting decent employment throughout the industry worldwide. It will create, as much as possible, a level playing in a globalized industry by ensuring that competition is not based on unjust, exploitive and unfair labour practices. This ambitious objective will be achieved through the early ratification of the Convention by a majority of nations active in the maritime sector", concludes Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry, Director of the ILO's International Labour Standards Department.