



20 YEARS OF THE MARITIME LABOUR CONVENTION

A Nautilus Federation report on continuous
improvement of the Seafarers' Bill of Rights



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Authored by Estelle Arnette for the Nautilus Federation

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Foreword

The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) was designed as a living instrument, a 'passport to decent work' that must evolve to meet the realities of seafaring in a globalised and highly competitive industry. Continuous improvement is central to this vision.

We welcomed the MLC in 2006 as the 'seafarers' bill of rights', but we couldn't stop there. The global shipping industry needed to continue steadily raising the social and employment rights of seafarers, recognising them as key workers and a crucial component of global supply chains.

This requires addressing not just the low-hanging fruit upon which the social partners can agree but also the fundamental issues such as hours of work and rest and crewing levels.

Our concerns encompass fatigue, accommodation standards, criminalisation of seafarers, and access to shore leave for medical and welfare facilities. We want to see improved social connectivity to home and family life, shorter tours of duty and of course improved pay, social security protection and provision for retirement. These are not marginal matters; they are essential to both seafarer welfare and the safe operation of the shipping industry.

The ongoing debate around the recruitment and retention crisis will remain hollow if governments and shipowners dismiss these fundamental issues and instead call for solutions that do not tackle the root causes of the crisis.

The application and enforcement of the MLC remains an ongoing challenge. The experiences of seafarers during the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing crew change crisis illustrate that graphically. While 112 countries have ratified the Convention, representing more than 96% of the world's shipping fleet by gross tonnage, there are still key parts of the world not covered by the provisions of the Convention, leaving seafarers open to exploitation. To address this, a global campaign by the social partners at the international level is underway to promote and encourage further

ratification and effective implementation of the Convention. The ILO also promotes ratification and supports states who express a desire to ratify.

If we are able to meaningfully advance the minimum standards of the MLC, we must anticipate that more and more states may choose to opt out of the improvements, especially if we are able to reach agreement on the fundamental issues such as hours of work and rest. At some juncture, therefore, in order to protect the key aims of the Convention, the level playing field and continuous improvement, the MLC will need to be reconsolidated to reincorporate all the amendments that have been agreed and adopted and reset the dial (see Appendix 1, overview of MLC amendments). In the full glare of public opinion, such a reset would challenge states that have opted out of amendments, bring clarity to the industry, simplify ILO oversight, and expose those states and shipowners who seek to undermine the agreed minimum standards and the achievement of decent work for seafarers.

The most urgent reforms lie in securing improved working and rest hours for seafarers to tackle fatigue, but progress must also extend to enabling a just transition for seafarers to ensure they are not left behind and have fair access to training, upskilling, and reskilling without financial burdens falling on the seafarers themselves. Ensuring this just transition as the industry transforms towards meeting its net zero obligations is a critical step in fulfilling the MLC's promise.

Continuous improvement of the Convention is not just a necessity to protect those whose work underpins the global economy but a moral obligation to reward those who, as key workers, keep global supply chains moving.

Mark Dickinson
Director
Nautilus Federation

April 2026

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Abbreviations

OCEACR	Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations
EMSA	European Maritime Safety Agency
FOC	Flag of convenience
ICS	International Chamber of Shipping
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IMEC	International Maritime Employers' Council
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
JMC	Joint Maritime Commission
LILS	Legal Issues and International Labour Standards Section (LILS)
MLC	Maritime Labour Convention
MARPOL	International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SOLAS	International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea
SRI	Seafarers' Rights International
STC	Special Tripartite Committee
STCW	International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WMU	World Maritime University

Executive summary

This report examines the history, evolution, and ongoing challenges of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (as amended) or MLC, with a particular focus on the principle of advancing the minimum standards provided therein through continuous improvement towards the goal of achieving decent work for all the world's seafarers.

The analysis begins with the Convention's origins, tracing its development from foundational milestones to its present role as a dynamic, living instrument. Central to the Convention is the ethos of 'Decent work at sea: a journey, not a destination,' which underlines the report's exploration of the MLC's dynamic standard-setting approach.

The Covid-19 pandemic is assessed as a recent stress test, revealing both vulnerabilities and strengths in global maritime labour governance. The report then addresses persistent implementation challenges and structural risks, including the risks that a two-tier compliance system is beginning to emerge. To address these challenges, a tentative reform approach is outlined, aiming to enhance minimum standards and ensure meaningful protections

for all seafarers. Some longer-term considerations are set out to safeguard the MLC's future cohesion and relevance, and contributing to policy discussions on renewing international commitment to decent work at sea.

Despite its ambitious foundation aligned with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, the report finds that while the MLC has delivered important advances, significant decent work deficits persist onboard ships. The root challenge lies not just in enforcement, which is crucial, but also in the sufficiency of its core minimum standards. Accordingly, strengthening these standards, supported by robust tripartism and social dialogue involving governments, employers, and workers, will be critical to realising the Convention's potential in today's highly competitive and globalised maritime industry. Tackling sea blindness is also essential, ensuring that the role of shipping and the realities of seafarers' lives are visible in government policymaking and that the MLC continues to evolve as a credible framework for decent work at sea.

Keywords: seafarers, MLC, rights and standards, implementation and enforcement, continuous improvement



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A living instrument for seafarers: the Maritime Labour Convention

This report is organised to reflect both the historical significance and the evolving nature of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (as amended), with a specific emphasis on the principle of continuous improvement in seafarers' minimum standards.

This chapter grounds the discussion in the origins of the MLC, highlighting its role as a living instrument shaped by the Geneva Accord adopted by the Joint Maritime Commission (JMC) at its 29th Session (2001) which set out a vision for a consolidated 'framework convention' (ILO, 2001a):

The Geneva Accord is the first important step on a difficult road towards ensuring that our uniquely international industry has in place an effective body of globally applied labour standards. We are proud to be the torchbearers for the ILO's campaign to promote decent work the world over. Representatives of the International Shipping Federation (ISF) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) on behalf of shipowners and seafarers respectively

Building on this foundation, the chapter titled **Decent Work at Sea: A Journey, Not a Destination** explores how the MLC has laid the groundwork for progress, while highlighting the importance of ongoing improvements to decent work onboard ships.

The report then turns to the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, which laid bare the fragility and resilience of maritime labour governance under crisis.

From there, it moves into a detailed examination of current implementation

challenges, before unpacking deeper structural issues, including the emergence of a two-tier compliance system.

With these challenges mapped, the report outlines a strategic reform agenda aimed at transforming minimum requirements into meaningful protections for seafarers.

The final chapters articulate a long-term vision for the MLC's future relevance and cohesion, concluding with targeted policy recommendations to galvanise renewed international commitment.

Each chapter builds on the previous one, contributing to a broader understanding of the MLC's role in supporting decent work at sea.

Origins of the MLC and its adoption in 2006

In 1920, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the National Seamen's Code Recommendation. This was a call for a unified international code setting out seafarers' rights and duties, prompted by the unique natural, technical, and social risks associated with maritime employment (Adăscăliței, 2014).

Over the years, this initiative expanded into more than 68 ILO Conventions and Recommendations focused on the maritime sector. However, implementation was often inconsistent and enforcement weak, leading to legal fragmentation. Maritime work presents a jurisdictional challenge due to its international nature, as workers and ships often cross borders, complicating the application of national

laws (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin and McConnell, 2006; McConnell, 2009).

By the 1990s, growing concerns over seafarers' working conditions prompted renewed discussions between seafarers and shipowners. However, these talks were marked by disagreements and a lack of compromise (Adăscăliței, 2014).

In this context, the ITF continued its long-standing efforts and established the International Commission on Shipping (ICONS)¹ – an independent and voluntary initiative initiated in 1999 with the aim of investigating and exposing systemic abuses and injustices faced by seafarers globally. It brought together a wide range of stakeholders including governments, industry, and trade unions to develop practical and actionable solutions to the challenges within the international shipping industry. ICONS exposed the deep-rooted exploitation within the global maritime industry and laid out a vision for a future defined by transparency, accountability, and quality standards. Its recommendations emphasised collective industry leadership and regulatory courage to protect seafarers from what the report boldly termed 'modern slavery'. The Commission uncovered a pattern of severe mistreatment of seafarers, including:

- heating and blacklisting of seafarers
- manipulation of remittance systems
- fraudulent job placement fees
- abuse of 'quit claims' and compensation waivers
- non-payment or delayed payment of wages

- inadequate food, medical care, accommodation, and rest
- psychological and physical abuse, sexual assault, and abandonment

These practices were blatant violations of ILO conventions (International Commission on Shipping, 2000).

Meanwhile, to address the inefficiencies and outdated review mechanisms of existing instruments, the ILO aimed to develop a more coherent and enforceable framework. The ILO Governing Body, acting through its Legal Issues and International Labour Standards Section (LILS), launched a programme of work to review the entire body of existing ILO instruments, and given the number of maritime instruments, there was a particular focus on those applicable to the maritime sector. This initiative reflected growing concern that the large number of maritime labour Conventions and Recommendations had become fragmented, outdated, some poorly ratified and increasingly difficult to apply in a coherent manner to ever increasingly globalised shipping industry. The Governing Body therefore challenged the Seafarers' and Shipowners' Groups to consider how best to tackle this task and to identify priorities for promotion, revision, or abrogation.

When the ILO threw down that challenge the ITF and ISF agreed that the only realistic way forward would be to consolidate all ILO maritime instruments into one convention. A very bold proposal but we had the solid foundations of social dialogue fuelled, as was so often the case in those days, by good food and beverages at a famous curry house and

former seafarers' hostel in Aldgate in East London! Interview with Mark Dickinson, director, Nautilus Federation (2025)

A Joint Working Group of shipowners' and seafarers' representatives met under the auspices of LILS in the late 1990s to examine the full range of maritime instruments and to advise the Governing Body's Working Party on Policy regarding the revision of standards. Their review confirmed that many existing instruments overlapped, were poorly ratified, or had been overtaken by later standards. The process helped to crystallize the view that only a comprehensive consolidation exercise could ensure effective, up-to-date and universally applicable labour standards for the maritime industry (ILO, 2001b).

In 2001, at the 29th session of the Joint Maritime Commission², the Geneva Accord was agreed which set out proposals for a new 'framework convention' to consolidate all the ILO's maritime instruments into a single, comprehensive legal document. A High-Level Tripartite Working Group was thus established, leading to years of negotiations (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin and McConnell, 2006).

On 23 February 2006, the Maritime Labour Convention was formally adopted during an ILO conference at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The adoption process saw participation from delegates representing 106 countries, as well as shipowners' and seafarers' organisations with the ambition of establishing decent work for seafarers and a level-playing field for shipowners (Lillie, 2008; McConnell, 2009). The Convention received 314 votes in favour,

with no votes against and two abstentions, signaling overwhelming global support.

The MLC represented a major advancement in formal protections for seafarers and became the fourth pillar of international maritime law, alongside the following IMO Conventions:

- MARPOL (Marine Pollution)
- SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea)
- STCW (Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping)

For the MLC to enter into force, it required ratification by at least 30 ILO member states representing a minimum of 33% of global gross shipping tonnage. The MLC entered into force in August 2013 and as of January 2026, 112 countries had ratified it, representing more than 96% of the world's shipping fleet by gross tonnage (ILO, 2026).

This Convention was seen as a landmark legal instrument, not only consolidating and modernising over 68 previous ILO maritime standards, but ensuring better enforcement and compliance as well as constituting an adaptive framework for continuous improvements (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin and McConnell, 2025).

The Convention represented a significant advancement in protecting seafarers' rights globally; it guarantees a whole range of key entitlements for seafarers, covering issues of work and life onboard such as payment of wages, leave, repatriation and medical care. The Convention has been described by the director-general of the International Labour Organization, Dr Juan Somavia, as 'making labour history' (ILO, 2008).

¹ The Commission was chaired by Hon. Peter Morris, former Australian Minister for Transport and Industrial Relations.

² The Joint Maritime Commission (JMC) is the only permanent bipartite body within the ILO, bringing together representatives of seafarers and shipowners on an equal footing. Established in 1920, it has a unique status as the forum where the two social partners in the maritime industry jointly advise the ILO on maritime labour standards and policy. Unlike the ILO's tripartite structures, which normally include governments, the JMC operates on a bipartite basis, reflecting the highly international character of shipping and the shared responsibility of seafarers' and shipowners' organizations in shaping effective global labour standards (ILO, 2011).

Decent work at sea: A journey, not a destination

The International Labour Organization, a specialised agency of the United Nations, was established in 1919, predating the UN. The ILO describes itself as 'devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace'. The only tripartite UN agency, since 1919 the ILO has brought together governments, employers and workers of 187 member states, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men (ILO, 2024a).

According to the ILO (ILO, 2024b), decent work represents the core aspirations people have in their working lives. It includes:

- productive employment that offers a fair income
- workplace security and universal social protection
- opportunities for personal growth and social inclusion
- freedom of expression

To advance these goals, the ILO created a comprehensive Decent Work Agenda, focusing on job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, with gender equality as a crosscutting objective. The Decent Work framework is essential for reducing poverty, promoting fair globalisation and ensuring dignity and equity in the world of work.

It is against this backdrop of the Decent Work agenda that the MLC was developed to advance the rights of seafarers with the understanding that it would establish minimum standards, open to future improvement. The MLC serves as a passport to decent work: not a static or immutable instrument, but the beginning of a journey toward better working and living conditions at sea (ILO, 2013b; Nautilus International, 2020).

It is the obligation of all those associated with the MLC to advance the current minimum standards, but we need to know where we want to be in 10, 20 and 30 years and beyond. **Mark Dickinson, general secretary of Nautilus International (2020)**

With over 96% of the world fleet now covered by the MLC, Nautilus has consistently emphasised the need for a long-term vision and strategy to ensure the MLC truly becomes a 'passport to decent work' for seafarers. Nautilus has also called for stronger enforcement of standards like working hours, minimum wages, and a greater focus on the human element amid technological change. Nautilus has urged the international maritime community to support this vision by continuously improving the minimum standards of the MLC and to enhance and protect seafarers' rights.

It is important to recognise that the MLC was innovative not only in its

content but also in its development process. Through an inclusive, five-year process that followed the JMC's adoption of the Geneva Accord and was led by the ILO and its tripartite constituents, the Convention sought to find solutions to complex issues such as social security, the joint and several liabilities of shipowners, employers and managers, and onboard and onshore complaint procedures. All of these complex issues were addressed collaboratively before incorporation and adoption. The MLC's design prioritises flexibility to accommodate national differences while maintaining strong protections for seafarers, and it aimed for broader ratification than earlier labour conventions (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin and McConnell, 2025).

As Mark Dickinson, Nautilus International general secretary, observed in 2025:

The Maritime Labour Convention serves as a foundation for decent work at sea, but its continued relevance depends on a vision, a strategy to deliver it, and the maintenance of ambition with a commitment to ongoing improvement through social dialogue.

To ensure continuous improvement, the spirit of inclusive development and genuine social dialogue that shaped the MLC must remain central to its future evolution.



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Seafarers in crisis: Covid-19 and the global wake-up call

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities in global supply chains and underscored the essential role of seafarers in sustaining international trade. Despite facing severe mobility restrictions, they ensured the continued delivery of essential goods worldwide (UNCTAD, 2022).

It is important to recall that during the pandemic, seafarers faced prolonged periods at sea due to suspended or delayed crew changes, often remaining onboard for months beyond their contracts because of border closures and travel restrictions. They also experienced increased workloads, fatigue, and mental health challenges, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as limited access to shore leave, medical care, and essential supplies. Many reported feeling unsafe in ports, lacked consistent support from shipping companies, and were concerned about their families at home, all of which contributed to significant stress and exhaustion (ILO, 2020; Pauksztat et al., 2020; Pauksztat, Grech and Kitada, 2022; Vairavan, 2022).

In recognition of their contribution, seafarers were formally designated as key workers³ by several UN bodies and at least 65 member states, a move that catalysed unprecedented international coordination (United Nations, 2020; IMO, 2022). Several collaborative mechanisms emerged to address the crisis. For example, the UN Ad Hoc Interagency Taskforce on Covid-19 and Maritime Crew Change played a pivotal role in aligning cross-agency responses and promoting safe crew changes (Nautilus International, 2021; IMO, 2023). The Joint Action Group to review the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the world's transport workers and the global

supply chain (JAG-TSC) united industry and labour representatives to advocate for pragmatic, on-the-ground solutions (ILO, 2023; IMO, 2023).

These efforts by international organisations and national authorities not only helped mitigate the immediate crisis but also revealed the fragmented and sometimes inefficient nature of international maritime governance (Merk, Hoffmann and Haralambides, 2022).

The pandemic laid bare the structural weaknesses of maritime governance and the failure of many governments to uphold their obligations under the Maritime Labour Convention. It was "sea blindness" writ large and if the MLC is to remain a meaningful safeguard for seafarers' employment and social rights, it must be backed by robust enforcement, global cooperation, and political will especially in times of crisis. Interview with Mark Dickinson, director, Nautilus Federation (2025)

While the pandemic acted as a catalyst for strengthened global cooperation, it also highlighted the imperative to develop resilient and sustainable frameworks to protect seafarers' welfare and mobility in future crises, especially those related to public health emergencies of international concern (UNCTAD, 2021). And central to this discussion is the MLC, which provides a comprehensive international framework for seafarers' rights, including provisions on repatriation, medical care, and decent work. However, during the pandemic, these protections were often bypassed or unevenly implemented, highlighting a gap

³ Seafarers were designated as 'key workers' at the fifth meeting of the Special Tripartite Committee (STC) of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006) in 2025, with related language intended to facilitate work-related mobility. The designation reflects lessons from the crew-change and mobility disruptions experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and is intended to support access to shore leave, repatriation, crew changes and medical care ashore.

between commitment and practice. While the MLC has been ratified by a majority of maritime nations, the limited adoption of complementary instruments, notably ILO Convention 185 on secure seafarers' identity documents, further complicated crew mobility and border transit.

Despite international calls to action, including UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/17 (United Nations, 2020) and the Neptune Declaration (2021), which called for seafarers to be designated as key workers and for cooperation to end the crew change crisis, countries implemented varying health, quarantine, and crew change protocols, leading to confusion and operational delays for ships and seafarers (EMSA, 2023). Restrictive contractual clauses, such as 'no crew change' provisions, continued to undermine seafarers' rights during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite international calls for collaboration, some charterers included clauses in contracts that prohibited or discouraged crew changes, aiming to avoid

potential delays or costs associated with deviations for crew relief. These clauses directly conflicted with seafarers' welfare and contractual rights, as well as shipowners' obligations under the MLC (IMO, 2020; Hand, 2021; UN Global Compact, 2021). The Nautilus Federation maintained that charter contracts should not contain clauses preventing necessary crew changes, as such restrictions undermine both safety and the fundamental rights of seafarers (Nautilus Federation, 2020).

The crisis therefore emphasised the need to strengthen enforcement mechanisms, promote coordination and cooperation by governments and the harmonisation of national legal frameworks, and ensuring that the MLC remained a living, evolving instrument capable of protecting seafarers during both normal operations and global disruptions. Sea blindness and poor coordination, not the MLC itself, failed seafarers during Covid-19, the Convention must keep evolving to deliver on its promise of decent work at sea.



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Where we stand: seafarers' rights in practice

Despite decades of advocacy by organisations such as the ITF and adoption and entry into force of the MLC, the practical enforcement of seafarers' rights remains deeply problematic. The IDWAL Social Impact Report⁴ (2024) reveals a troubling reality for many seafarers: 13% of vessels surveyed during the reporting period had no internet access at all, while many others reported poor or inconsistent connectivity. This lack of digital access severely undermines seafarers' ability to communicate with their families, access mental health and welfare services, and seek timely support in cases of abuse, exploitation, or isolation. In an industry increasingly reliant on digital tools for both operations and welfare, such gaps highlight ongoing systemic neglect of seafarers' basic rights.

Meanwhile, wage theft remains a widespread and persistent issue in the maritime sector. While the ITF successfully recovered over \$118.5 million in unpaid wages between 2020 and 2022, including more than \$36 million in 2022 alone, many cases still go unreported due to fear of retaliation, lack of legal recourse, or barriers to communication (ITF, 2023). Furthermore, the ITF reported that at least 2,286 seafarers had been abandoned on 222 vessels as of July 2025, leaving \$13.1 million in unpaid wages, a 30% increase compared to the same period in 2024 (ITF, 2025b).

These figures, while significant, likely represent only a portion of the problem, pointing to deeper structural issues in enforcement, oversight, and transparency within global shipping. Together, these findings expose the disconnect between policy commitments and lived realities for many seafarers worldwide (McGowan, 2025).

Despite the lessons from the Erika, the Prestige, the Tasman Spirit and the Hebei Spirit cases which became global symbols of the unjust treatment of seafarers and drew international condemnation (SRI 2024), criminalisation and failures in fair treatment persist. The Hebei Spirit case (South Korea, 2007–2009) highlighted in particular the lack of due process and legal protection for seafarers, the vulnerability of foreign crew in national legal systems and the chilling effect on seafarers' willingness to report incidents or accidents. In June 2025, global maritime leaders from the IMO, ILO, ICS, and ITF reaffirmed their commitment to fair treatment, due process, and coordinated action to protect seafarers' rights, especially in cases of detention related to their professional duties. They emphasised that unfair criminalisation remains a serious concern, calling for stronger enforcement of the IMO/ILO Fair Treatment Guidelines⁵, better legal protections, and enhanced cooperation across the industry. Key proposals include enhanced training for judicial authorities, increased insurer responsibility, the promotion of non-custodial measures in cases involving seafarers allegedly committing an offence, and strengthened coordination among States and stakeholders to ensure fair treatment and prompt repatriation (ITF, 2025a).

Abandonment of crews continues to rise, with alarming trends documented globally. Between 2020 and 2024, abandonment of crew by shipowners surged dramatically with a staggering 87% increase in 2024, marking the highest number on record, according to the ITF (Biscardo, 2025). The ITF further reported in July 2025 a sharp rise in the abandonment of seafarers, with at least

⁴IDWAL is a ship inspection, technology, and data company that provides independent assessments of vessel standards. Its 2024 Social Impact Report offers the first large-scale, data-driven insight into the real working and living conditions of seafarers, highlighting welfare and social performance across the global fleet.

⁵This refers to both the 2006 and 2025 guidelines covering maritime incidents and alleged criminal acts by seafarers.

2,286 crew members stranded on 222 vessels at that point. This represents a 30% increase compared to the same period same period in 2024. The majority of cases are concentrated in the Arab world (37%) and Europe (34%), and nearly 75% of the abandoned ships are flagged under so-called flags of convenience, which enable shipowners to evade responsibility. The ITF warns that abandonment is becoming a systemic abuse in the shipping industry, leaving seafarers without pay, food, or support (ITF, 2025b). The record-breaking figures underscore a deeply concerning trend in crew welfare and highlights a critical need for stronger enforcement of international protection standards, particularly those set out in the MLC on decent working and living conditions for seafarers.

Meanwhile, the sector faces a recruitment and retention crisis, as highlighted in the 2025 Nautilus Federation report (Arnette Brentnall, 2025), driven by poor working conditions and eroded trust. The report highlights the urgent need to address the maritime industry's worsening shortage of seafarers, exacerbated by their treatment during the Covid-19 pandemic and by the persistent gap between maritime education and access to employment, with few structured cadetship or apprenticeship programmes available to young seafarers. Drawing on over 20 academic studies, the report identifies three key factors influencing recruitment and retention: job satisfaction and working conditions, employer respect and engagement, and access to communication onboard. Clear solutions are proposed, including improving living and working conditions, reducing workload stress, promoting diversity, creating career development pathways, and supporting international cooperation. In

particular, considering permanent employment standards for seafarers is central to improving recruitment and retention. What is needed now is coordinated, immediate action to strengthen the seafaring workforce, especially as the industry prepares for a green transition requiring widespread retraining and upskilling.

This study shows that we have the answers: the time now is for action. **Nautilus Federation coordinator Danny McGowan (Nautilus Federation, 2025)**

World Maritime University (WMU) researchers conducted exploratory research to examine how well current regulations prevent fatigue, identify barriers to effective implementation onboard, and assess compliance with existing rules. Their findings confirmed that underreporting or adjusting work/rest hour records is common in the shipping industry, seriously affecting ship safety as well as seafarers' health and safety (Baumler *et al.*, 2020). Building on this, the WMU further conducted in 2022 the most extensive seafarer-led survey to date on work/rest regulation compliance and fatigue at sea, revealing widespread non-compliance and serious concerns over crew wellbeing. Key findings show that seafarers often work excessive hours, averaging 75 hours per week, with over 88% exceeding regulatory limits monthly and nearly 80% never having a full day off during their contracts, which in accordance with the MLC can be up to 11 months in duration. Many seafarers openly admit to falsifying records to avoid penalties, driven by fear of inspection or shipowner repercussions. The findings underscore the urgent need for regulatory reform, increased crewing levels, and cultural change across the maritime industry to protect seafarers' health, safety, and rights. (Bhatia *et al.*, 2024).

Another new WMU study shows that shore leave, once considered essential for seafarers' well-being, is rapidly declining due to high workloads, limited time in port, security restrictions, and lack of supporting infrastructure, resulting in over a quarter of seafarers receiving no shore leave at all during their contracts. The study emphasises that this erosion poses serious risks to mental health, safety, and crew retention, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated action by all maritime stakeholders to preserve and promote shore leave as a vital part of life at sea (Carrera-Arce *et al.*, 2025).

Accommodation also remains a persistent concern for seafarers, affecting both their health and overall wellbeing (Fotteler, Andrioti Bygvraa and Jensen, 2020; Mantoju, 2021). Despite the standards set out in the MLC, inadequate investment by some shipowners in maintaining and upgrading crew accommodation has resulted in many ships continuing to feature cramped living spaces, poor ventilation, and limited privacy. Poor accommodation can exacerbate fatigue, contribute to stress, and reduce morale, ultimately impacting safety and operational efficiency. Ensuring that living quarters meet modern ergonomic, sanitary, and comfort standards is essential to safeguard seafarers' health, dignity, and wellbeing.

If we factor in that a ship would typically have a 25 year commercial life span the necessity of reviewing the accommodation standards for merchant ships provided for in the MLC, the essential foundations of which were established in the 1940's and 1970's in ILO Conventions 75, 92 and 133, it becomes imperative that they are reviewed.

Interview with Mark Dickinson, Director, Nautilus Federation (2025).

Last but not least, the question of social security protection under Regulation 4.5 of the MLC proved to be one of the thorniest issues in the consolidation that led to the MLC. While access to social security is a cornerstone of decent work, the diversity of national systems and the transnational character of seafaring made it extremely difficult to design a robust and meaningful uniform framework within the MLC.

The ILO's own commentary acknowledges that drafting Reg. 4.5 involved 'extensive debate' within the High-level Group, particularly over the problem of seafarers working on foreign-flag ships who might fall outside both flag state and national systems (ILO, 2006). To secure agreement, the regulation was framed in flexible terms, allowing ratifying states to select only three branches of protection initially, with the possibility of gradual extension (Seafarers' Rights International, 2014)⁶. Subsequent studies have confirmed that coverage remains uneven and often poorly understood by seafarers themselves, reflecting wide national disparities in welfare systems (Jensen *et al.*, 2015).

This carefully crafted compromise allowed the Convention to move forward, but it left gaps and inconsistencies that are evident both in the text and in practice, and which will require sustained attention in future reviews of the MLC. In particular, many flag states have yet to fully implement Standard A4.5.8 and its accompanying Guidelines, leaving non-national seafarers under their flag without adequate social security protection.

Nearly 20 years after the adoption of the MLC, the landscape of maritime employment has changed in ways that the original Convention could not have fully anticipated. The rise

⁶ Under MLC Regulation 4.5.2 each member undertakes to take steps, according to its national circumstances, individually and through international cooperation, to achieve progressively comprehensive social security protection for seafarers.

of transnational crewing, increasingly complex employment chains, and greater workforce mobility have exposed new gaps and inconsistencies in social security protection for seafarers. At the same time, global crises, from pandemics to geopolitical tensions, have demonstrated how essential seafarers are to the resilience of supply chains, and how vulnerable they remain when social protection systems are unclear or fragmented. Addressing these emerging challenges is no longer optional: it is central to guaranteeing decent work, safeguarding workforce stability, and ensuring that the promises of the MLC translate into real, predictable protection for the people who keep the world's maritime transport moving.

Unequal dedication and focus: diverging commitments among social partners

Beneath the framework of the MLC also lies a more complex reality among social partners. It is crucial to shine light on the marked divergence in approaches taken by social partners, revealing underlying tensions and fragmented commitment to continuously improve the MLC that continue to challenge the Convention's cohesive and effective global application.

Efforts to address the persistent challenges in seafarers' rights have stalled: a proposal for an elaboration of a New Social Contract for Seafarers under the auspices of the Global Partnership between the ITF, IMEC and ICS⁷ has stalled due to shipowner reticence. Also, the implementation of the Maritime Just Transition Task Force's 10-Point Plan⁸ has seen little progress (Maritime Just Transition Task Force, 2022). Time and again we see stresses in the social partnership due to

differences of opinion about how to progress solutions to, for example, the recruitment and retention crisis.

Thus the social partners have taken markedly different approaches. The ITF set out a bold and comprehensive vision in 2024-2025 through through a proposal for a New Social Contract for seafarers and the shipping industry. This concept was first raised by the director-general of the ILO at an ITF/ICS/IMEC Summit in Manila in June 2023 (Shaping the Future of Shipping Seafarer 2050) to ensure coordinated action among governments, unions, and employers. As talks between ITF, ICS and IMEC to elaborate this concept progressed, and as hope of a consensus grew, ICS/IMEC put forward an alternative vision which in the opinion of the ITF fell short of capturing the full ambition for advancing seafarers' rights. It essentially viewed the MLC as a sufficient and comprehensive framework of minimum standards for seafarers' living and working conditions. ICS/IMEC argued that the MLC, already supported by a great number of ratifications and multiple enforcement mechanisms, was sufficient and they would not be bound by what they considered to be a commitment to continuously improve seafarers employment and social rights. While both ITF and ICS/IMEC proposals reaffirm the importance of decent work and fair treatment for seafarers, the ITF proposal goes significantly further, offering a concrete, actionable call for action by governments, unions and shipowners to meaningfully address the recruitment and retention of seafarers, including through measures to improve:

- wages and adequate living conditions
- access to social security and welfare
- occupational health and safety protections

- safe manning levels, hours of work and rest and
- effective enforcement of MLC standards and seafarers' rights

The ITF continues to demonstrate leadership by outlining a detailed vision and strategy for a pathway forward, including investment in education and training, reskilling of the maritime workforce, collaboration with maritime education and training institutions, and a strong commitment to social inclusion to ensure no seafarer is left behind in the transition to a decarbonised shipping industry.

Crucially, the ITF emphasises the importance of tripartism and social dialogue, calling for active engagement between governments, employers, and seafarers' trade unions. This approach underscores the ITF's demand that the governance of the shipping industry must be improved through the effective enforcement of Articles 91 and 94 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) adopted in 1982.

Shipowners' representatives have now reverted to their pre-Covid personas. We heard a lot about how crucial seafarers are during the pandemic when we needed to keep supply chains moving but now all those fine words have evaporated to be replaced with symbolic gestures. What we need is a commitment to the necessary meaningful, structural reforms. Despite efforts to project engagement, Shipowners actions fall short of what is required to genuinely advance seafarers' rights. They can, and must, do better, because seafarers deserve better. Interview with Mark Dickinson, director, Nautilus Federation (2025).

Shipowners are often quick to affirm that seafarers are indispensable to global trade, sustaining the uninterrupted movement of goods that underpin economies and link societies worldwide. Yet, this rhetoric stands in stark contrast to reality: despite the clear articulation of seafarers' rights in international legal instruments, those rights are too often sidelined, diluted, or outright violated in practice. From wage theft, abandonment and criminalisation to unsafe working conditions and denial of shore leave, too many seafarers face daily challenges that undermine their dignity, safety, and wellbeing.

This persistent gap between principle and practice reveals a systemic failure that can no longer be ignored. What is urgently needed is a renewed political will, from both governments and shipowners and the wider industry, to place seafarers' rights at the centre of maritime governance. This must be backed by robust enforcement mechanisms, clear accountability, and effective remedies when violations occur.

Protecting and enhancing seafarers' rights is not only a matter of justice, it is a strategic imperative for the sustainability and resilience of global supply chains. A truly fair and future-proofed maritime industry must begin by ensuring that the people at its heart are respected, protected, and empowered. This is the only way to ensure that the designation of seafarers as 'key workers' is a meaningful commitment.

⁷The Proposal for a Global Partnership towards leadership in the maritime industry was signed by the International Chamber of Shipping, the International Transport Workers' Federation and the International Maritime Employers' Council on 22 October 2022 in Singapore.

⁸The Maritime Just Transition Task Force was established during COP26 in November 2021, by the International Chamber of Shipping, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), the United Nations Global Compact, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The Task Force has the aim of supporting a just and human-centered decarbonization of the shipping industry.

One Convention, two realities: the emerging divide

Despite the foundational role of the MLC in setting minimum standards for decent work at sea, its uniform application remains challenged by persistent systemic issues. While the Convention has been heralded as a global benchmark for seafarers' rights (ILO, 2013a), its effective enforcement is far from universal.

This weakness in the MLC is underpinned by ground breaking research from Seafarers' Rights International in a report on the MLC (SRI, 2024)⁹ that highlights that the MLC has made significant progress in setting global standards, but its effectiveness is undermined by inconsistent implementation and enforcement. The SRI report calls for:

- stronger international oversight
- improved transparency and data collection
- greater accountability for flag and port states
- enhanced legal protections and access to justice for seafarers

It is clear that an emerging divide is appearing which has implications both for seafarers but also good shipowners and those countries who genuinely care for seafarers.

Challenges to the universal application of the MLC

Challenge of implementing amendments across a multitude of flag states

The complexity of implementing MLC amendments across a wide range of states (flag, port and labour-providing) with differing capacities and commitments highlights one of the Convention's most pressing difficulties. For example, many flag states, particularly those of convenience with no ability to exercise

effective control and with limited maritime infrastructure, face significant resource and capacity gaps, including a lack of qualified personnel, insufficient funding for inspections, and outdated or incomplete national legislation. As a result, legal ratification is often not matched by effective implementation, leading to partial compliance and delays in enforcement (EMSA, 2020; Sampson, 2022).

Compounding this challenge is the ambiguity in the MLC's language, with terms such as 'adequate' and 'appropriate' left open to broad interpretation (ILO, 2019). While the convention shows flexibility in terms of implementation for the ratifying states through the concept of substantial equivalence, it also results in inconsistent enforcement and inspection standards (Mantoju, 2021). The lack of legal harmonisation across jurisdictions not only weakens the Convention's effectiveness but also fosters a regulatory environment where minimum standards are variably defined and applied (Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

Risk of a two-tier system: compliant vs non-compliant states

These disparities have given rise to concerns over a two-tier system, dividing compliant states that adhere rigorously to MLC standards from those that either lack the capacity or the political will to do so or seek to exploit the flexibility that is provided for in the Convention. Substandard operators continue to exploit the regulatory gaps offered by less stringent jurisdictions that the disconnect between vessel ownership and flag registration and the prevalence of flags of convenience provides. This in turn has contributed to the internationalisation and casualisation of maritime labour.

Seafarers are often hired through third-party crewing agencies serving shipowners and managers based in different countries. With ships as mobile workplaces operating across borders and jurisdictions, regulating and enforcing labour standards in the industry remains highly complex and fragmented (Bloor, Sampson and Gekara, 2013; Sampson and Ellis, 2015). This undermines fair competition and creates a competitive disadvantage for responsible shipowners.

Although Port State Control mechanisms exist to inspect foreign vessels, inconsistent application of these inspections and in some cases corruption allow many substandard ships to continue operating with impunity (Sampson *et al.*, 2016; Sampson, 2022).

Political and legal inertia: the need for reconsolidation

One of the most significant obstacles to full MLC implementation lies in political and legal inertia (Sampson, 2022). In many cases, even after ratification, necessary updates to national legislation are delayed by bureaucratic reluctance or political resistance. Such inertia undermines both national and international efforts to harmonise standards and frustrates the work of industry actors, some of whom are already proactively applying MLC principles beyond what is required.

This stagnation has renewed calls for reconsolidation, not only in terms of clarifying the Convention's language and enforcement mechanisms but also in fostering deeper cooperation between relevant departments, agencies, and international stakeholders (ILO, 2021). Without a strong political commitment, industry-driven initiatives tend to be uneven and may struggle to achieve lasting results.

The Maritime Labour Convention must evolve, not just through amendments, but through reconsolidation: bringing together all the agreed amendments, provide greater clarity where necessary, renew calls for stronger coordination and political commitment from all sides. This will allow an opportunity to reset the level playing field, remove any ambiguity, and offer an opportunity to strengthen the application and enforcement of the Convention by ratifying States.

Interview with Mark Dickinson, director, Nautilus Federation (2025).

Flag, port, and labour supply state coordination, a critical weakness exposed

The importance of coordinated action among flag states, port states, and labour-supplying countries has become even more evident in light of recent global crises. As explained, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of state coordination, with thousands of seafarers stranded at sea or denied basic rights due to inconsistent national responses (ILO, 2021). In response, the 5th session of the Special Tripartite Committee¹⁰ (STC) in 2025 agreed an amendment to the MLC requiring member states to recognise seafarers as 'key workers' not only in times of public health emergencies but always. The aim of the amendment is to secure seafarers their rights to medical care, crew changes, and repatriation (Nautilus International, 2025). This amendment, shaped through tripartite agreement at the STC represents an important step forward.

However, its successful implementation hinges on a level of international cooperation and information sharing that remains uneven and often politically fraught. The continued lack of a 'genuine link' between ships and their flag

⁹ This comprehensive study evaluates the global implementation and enforcement of the MLC, highlighting both achievements and significant gaps. The report estimates that the MLC is achieving an approximate success rate of 65% worldwide. It includes a Table of Indicators assessing individual states' enforcement efforts and identifies areas requiring further attention to ensure a level playing field for seafarers.

¹⁰ The ILO Special Tripartite Committee (STC): established by the ILO Governing Body in June 2013 under Article XIII of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006), the Special Tripartite Committee plays a pivotal role in the Convention's ongoing development and application. Comprising representatives from governments, employers, and workers, the STC is charged with continuously reviewing the MLC's implementation and proposing necessary amendments to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in safeguarding seafarers' rights. This tripartite structure underscores the ILO's commitment to inclusive dialogue and consensus-building in the evolution of international labour standards. International Labour Organization (2025) Special Tripartite Committee established under the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006. Available at: www.ilo.org/international-labour-standards/maritime-labour-convention-2006-0/special-tripartite-committee-established-maritime-labour-convention

states (McConnell, 2009), further complicates accountability, allowing some states to benefit economically from flags of convenience while shirking their responsibilities to seafarers.

When a shipowner chooses a flag to avoid effective oversight by the flag state authorities, and to be clear that is what they are doing when they choose an FOC, the result is not convenience, nor is it victimless; it's complicity in the erosion of seafarers' rights. Interview with Mark Dickinson, director, Nautilus Federation (2025)

A call for unity: spotlight on the tacit amendment procedure in the MLC

Tightening up the language of the MLC to remove ambiguities is one necessary solution. However, unifying the MLC is essential if the tacit amendment procedure produces a fragmented, multi-tiered framework where seafarers' rights and protections vary by country (see Appendix 3, which gives an overview of which countries have not accepted or opted out of specific amendments to the MLC up to those agreed in 2022). Consistent global standards are of course key to ensuring that all seafarers, regardless of the flag under which they work, benefit equally from vital employment protections and welfare provisions.

Therefore, this section focuses on the tacit amendment procedure which under Article XV paragraph 8(a) of the MLC allows amendments to the Code to enter into force unless a specified number of parties object within a defined period. Unlike traditional, express ratification, this process is designed to keep the Convention agile and up-to-date (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin & McConnell, 2006; LeClercq, 2015). However, the effectiveness of the tacit

acceptance procedure relies on countries actively objecting within a set timeframe (Christodoulou-Varotsi, 2012). If states neither explicitly accept nor object to amendments, this can result in ambiguity regarding their legal obligations (Blaskowsky, 2024).

While the tacit amendment procedure is generally effective, problems can arise when countries do not explicitly accept amendments. These include legal fragmentation, implementation difficulties, unfair competition, and uncertainty for both shipowners and seafarers. Divergence in the acceptance of amendments weakens global solidarity and hinders collective advancement in employment standards. Non-acceptance by some states may also create unfair advantages for shipowners operating under those flags, undermining the level playing field and fair competition within the industry. This risk is further amplified as the Convention evolves to address fundamental issues highlighted earlier in this report, such as fatigue and hours of work and rest, because divergence in tacit amendment acceptance could then create even greater disparities in employment protections and operational standards across the global shipping industry.

Inconsistencies in the application of maritime standards across jurisdictions further complicate compliance, inspections, and reporting for shipping companies operating internationally. Port state control authorities may encounter difficulties enforcing or inspecting ships according to revised standards when not all countries apply the same amendments. If enough states register objections and refuse to accept amendments, the overall effectiveness of the MLC is diminished, potentially leaving large

numbers of seafarers without the benefit of improved employment and welfare standards. Additionally, the need to monitor, notify, and manage amendment statuses across multiple states places a considerable administrative burden on international organisations and national authorities.

Thus the tacit amendment procedure could increasingly contribute to the fragmentation of the MLC. As more amendments are adopted at STC meetings, some countries have begun to formally refuse or delay acceptance, creating a 'multi-tiered' MLC in which different standards apply across different jurisdictions. This trend is already evident, as demonstrated by recent non-acceptances or delayed acceptances from countries such as Slovenia, France, and Portugal, as well as ongoing delays regarding previous amendments (e.g. those stemming from the 2020 STC)¹¹. While most disagreements to date have been relatively minor or procedural, more substantial or controversial changes, such as amendments on hours of work and rest, social security protection or accommodation are likely to face even stronger resistance from some flag states due to competitive and industry pressures¹².

This increasing risk of divergence highlights the need to consider reconsolidating or unifying MLC amendments in the future to preserve a global level playing field for minimum standards for maritime labour. This can only be done by a full blown International Labour Conference and that also would offer up the opportunity to review the Articles and the Regulations of the Convention to bolster its effectiveness and scope. Interview with Mark Dickinson, director Nautilus Federation (2025).

Commitment among governments, seafarers and shipowners is crucial to drive improvements in the MLC's most important aspects. By acting collectively, governments and the social partners can close gaps in seafarer protections, strengthen effectiveness and enforcement, and advance comprehensive reforms that address emerging challenges in the maritime sector. This shared commitment is key to safeguarding fair working conditions, upholding seafarers' fundamental rights, and ensuring that progress in maritime labour is both equitable and enduring.

Yet despite two decades of progress under the Maritime Labour Convention, too many governments continue to delay or dilute the implementation of its core protections as evidenced by the observations of the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) (ILO, 2024c). This tendency, whether due to lack of political will, administrative complexity or inertia, or a failure to recognise the strategic importance of shipping, signals a troubling reality: the world's seafarers, the key workers who keep global trade moving, are still not afforded the seriousness and urgency their rights deserve. Shipping remains the backbone of the world economy, yet it is persistently pushed down national priorities; treated as invisible until crisis strikes. While it is difficult to accelerate the pace of action by the ILO, the social partners should be united in refusing to concede ground or accept stagnation. The commitment of the seafarers' unions is unwavering: the MLC must not remain a paper promise. Governments must be held accountable to their obligations, and seafarers must finally receive the respect, protection, and dignity that the Convention was designed to ensure.

¹¹ The NORMLEX ILO database is the primary source to verify current acceptance and delayed implementation status by country: normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmb_en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:11301:0::NO::P11301_INSTRUMENT_AMENDMENT_ID:4287244 (Acceptance of amendments of 2022 to the MLC, 2006)

¹² Flags of convenience notoriously under cut each other and of course undermine bona fide flag states.

From minimum to meaningful: advancing seafarers' standards

To strengthen protections and improve the working and living conditions of seafarers, the next phase of development and implementation of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) must be guided by a clear vision and a strategy incorporating a renewed set of priorities.

These priorities should place seafarers' wellbeing, dignity, and fundamental rights at the forefront of regulatory reform by governments. This means going beyond minimum standards to promote decent work for seafarers and a more humane, equitable, and sustainable shipping industry. It requires not only addressing persistent gaps in implementation, enforcement and oversight of the MLC, but also ensuring that the voices of seafarers are meaningfully included in shaping the policies that affect them by strengthening social dialogue within a robust framework of international cooperation, coordination and accountability on the part of governments.

The following immediate priorities for the MLC must be urgently advanced by the ILO Special Tripartite Committee (see also Appendix 2, providing a checklist linking priorities to MLC amendments for practical advancement of seafarers' working and living conditions):

Strengthening employment conditions

Promote permanent employment and ensure greater job security across the shipping industry.

Reduce the maximum period onboard to industry norms e.g. six-nine months.

Include provisions for retirement savings to provide for a dignified retirement for

seafarers by, for example, reviewing and incorporating ILO Convention 71 (1946) into the MLC.

Tackle fatigue by ensuring all ships are adequately crewed so that the maximum hours of work and the minimum hours of rest are sufficient to prevent exhaustion and maintain safe and effective operations at sea.

Improving work-life balance and welfare

Reassess fatigue management standards by revisiting hours of work/rest and limiting tour lengths and improving leave (both annual and compensatory).

Guarantee social connectivity at sea by providing adequate, free and universal wi-fi access to support mental health and wellbeing.

Upgrading living conditions

Improve accommodation standards in the MLC and seek amendment to other instruments to ensure shipowners are not disincentivised from improving living and working conditions onboard.¹³

Ensure no offsets, charges or deductions are made for seafarers accommodation.

Expanding rights and protections

Ratification and implementation of the Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (C185) for secure and dignified travel for all seafarers.

Enhance occupational safety and health by empowering safety representatives and fostering a strong safety culture onboard.

Drive urgent reform of Title 4.5 of the MLC, to drive continuous improvement and ensure comprehensive and accessible social security protection for all seafarers.

Building a fair and inclusive future

Integrate the Just Transition framework, linking environmental goals with social protections and ensure access to training free of charge to the seafarers.

Promote gender inclusion and youth empowerment to help build a more diverse and resilient maritime workforce.

Establish structured and globally accessible cadetship and apprenticeship programmes to develop and support the next generation of maritime professionals.

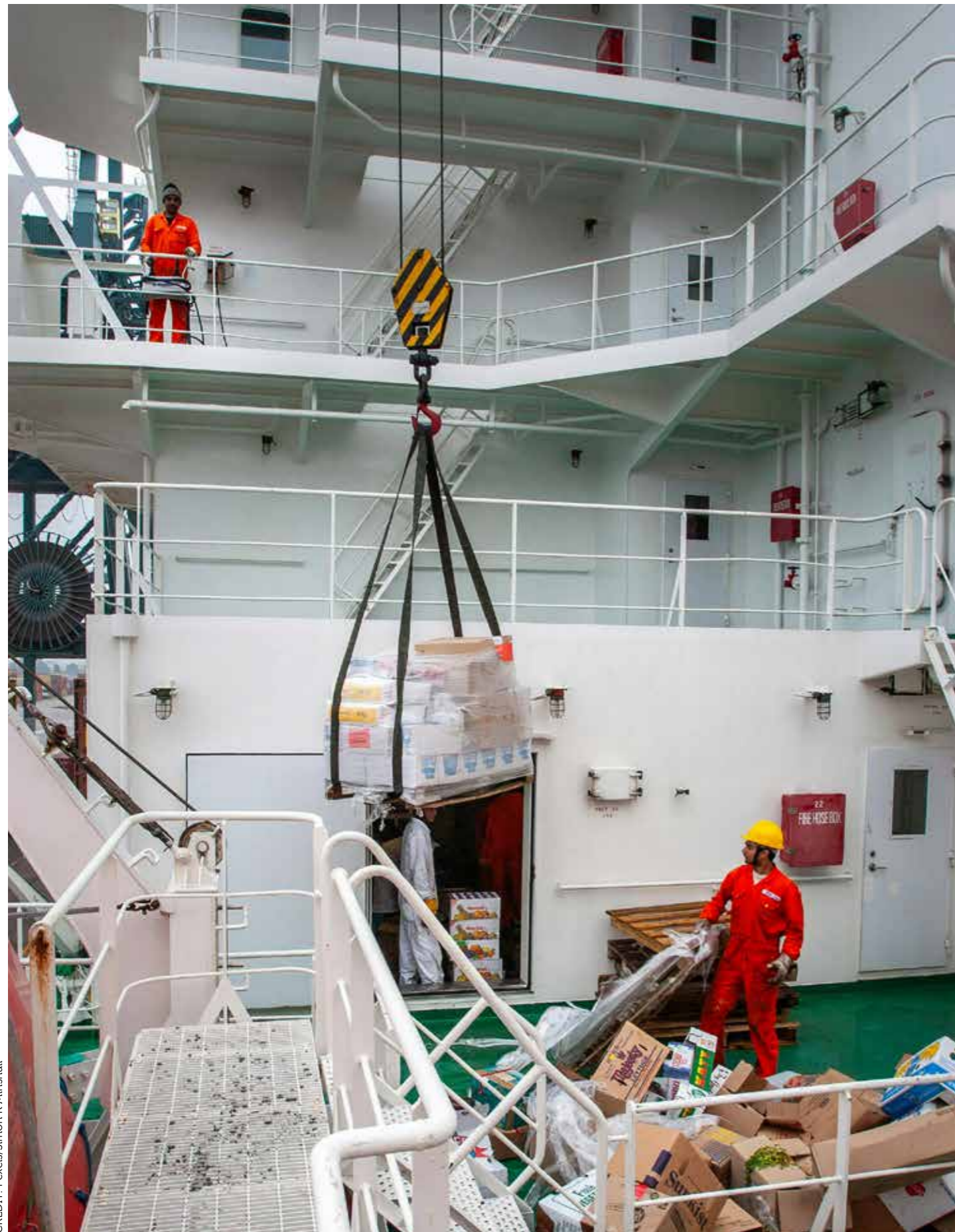
This is a pivotal moment for the Maritime Labour Convention, and by advancing bold and coordinated reforms across these five immediate priority areas: employment security, work-life balance, living conditions, rights and protections, and an inclusive, future-ready maritime workforce, the industry can start to address a growing recruitment and retention crisis. This is no longer optional but imperative. Seafarers are not only essential to the global economy; they are the backbone of resilient supply chains and maritime sustainability. They truly are key workers.

Social partners, seafarers and shipowners must jointly champion transformative change to secure fairer contracts, safer workplaces, and equal opportunities for all seafarers. The path ahead demands vision, cooperation, and a shared commitment to dignity at sea. By working together, we can ensure the MLC evolves as a living instrument that continuously improves and genuinely protects those who move the world.



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¹³ For example the IMO Convention on Tonnage Measurement of ships, 1969 is often cited as problematic as it effectively levies taxes on ships based on Gross Tonnage including accommodation which has resulted in ships being built with minimal accommodation to reduce port entry fees.



The next chapter for maritime labour

As the maritime industry undergoes profound shifts, from decarbonisation and digitalisation to increasing geopolitical instability and labour fragmentation¹⁴, the MLC must evolve to remain relevant, resilient, and robust.

While the MLC has served as a cornerstone of maritime labour standards for the past twenty years, the lived experiences of many seafarers reveal persistent gaps between rights on paper and realities at sea. Key issues such as employment insecurity, fatigue and hours of rest, lack of access to communication (social connectivity), outdated accommodation standards, and weak enforcement mechanisms underscore the need for structural reform meaning fundamental changes to the regulatory framework and institutional arrangements that govern seafarers' work and welfare.

Moreover, global crises like Covid-19 have exposed the vulnerability of seafarers as 'essential but expendable' workers, underscoring the need for clearer protections, stronger compliance, and political commitment to implementation and enforcement. Despite being repeatedly referred to as 'key workers' during the Covid-19 crisis, many seafarers were stranded at sea, unable to return home and left unsupported, highlighting how critical they are to global trade, yet how expendable they are treated in practice.

Today social partners and governments face a strategic opportunity: to materially advance the minimum standards and also to prepare for a needed reconsolidation and modernisation of the MLC to reflect contemporary challenges and anticipate future ones. This includes enshrining permanent employment standards, guaranteeing and enhancing social security protection, including better retirement

provisions, addressing gender and generational inclusion, adapting to environmental transitions, and continuously improving the living and working conditions of seafarers to advance the journey to decent work.

Without bold and cooperative action, the MLC risks being outpaced by the very transformations it was designed to underpin. With it, however, the global maritime community can reaffirm a collective commitment to decent work, equitable treatment, and a sustainable shipping industry.

Call to action: advancing seafarers' minimum standards together

For governments:

Ratify the MLC

Whilst nearly 97% of the world fleet is covered by the MLC there remain gaps in coverage with significant countries failing to ratify, leaving gaps in some regions.

Implement and enforce amendments

Translate MLC amendments promptly into national law and create robust mechanisms for updating standards, for enforcement and compliance.

Commit to the MLC

Avoid selective adoption or opt-outs, preventing a fragmented ('multi-tiered') MLC framework.

Strengthen coordination and cooperation

Cooperate across flag, labour providing and port states and with international organisations to streamline repatriation, promote welfare, and monitor compliance.

Ratify and implement C185

Enhance security and facilitate the travel and repatriation of seafarers and their access to welfare and medical services ashore.

¹⁴ As explained by Campling and Colás (2023), seafarers today are divided by numerous factors, including the type of shipping sector, the ship's flag or company, and internal hierarchies on board such as rank, skills, nationality, race, gender, and disparities in working conditions and pay.

Support efforts to review and amend as necessary the IMO Convention on Tonnage Measurement of Ships, 1969

To ensure shipowners are not incentivised to compromise the provision of decent accommodation to seafarers onboard their vessels.

Support the ILO

The ILO should be provided with the necessary resources to carry out its role as the guardian of decent work for seafarers and bolster its supervisory structures that are tasked with holding states to account for the responsibilities and obligations.

Ensure that social partners are meaningfully consulted

Social partners should be consulted throughout the development of maritime policies, rather than being engaged only after strategic national decisions have been made as a formality.

For social partners (seafarers' unions, shipowners' associations):

Strengthen employment conditions

Champion stable and secure employment by promoting permanent contracts and dignified retirement/pension schemes for all seafarers, regardless of permanent or temporary employment models.

Work together to modernise employment frameworks in line with evolving workforce needs and industry realities.

Improve work-life balance and welfare

Collaborate to reduce hours of work, increase rest, boost crewing levels, reduce tour lengths, and expand leave entitlements, to prioritise seafarers' physical and mental health and improve safety at sea.

Ensure free and universal onboard wifi to enhance social connectivity to support mental health, well-being, family contact, and access to digital services.

Upgrade living conditions

Jointly review and improve accommodation standards, to ensure safe, dignified, and healthy living spaces for all crew.

Advance crew well-being by promoting access to shore leave and recreational spaces onboard.

Expand rights and protections

Develop and enforce robust procedures to prevent violence, harassment, and discrimination in all forms, including through confidential reporting mechanisms and effective follow-up.

Support the full ratification and implementation of C185 to help establish genuine identity and credentials for seafarers.

Collaborate on urgent reform of MLC Title 4.5 to extend comprehensive social security protection and coverage for all seafarers.

Build a fair and inclusive future

Support Just Transition policies that link environmental sustainability with opportunities for upskilling and reskilling and protections for jobs and livelihoods.

Champion gender inclusion and youth empowerment by removing barriers to entry and creating meaningful pathways for career development.

Ensure free and inclusive access to training and skills development, including e-learning, digital literacy, and education on seafarers' rights under the MLC.

For international bodies:

Monitor implementation

Use international inspection, reporting, and arbitration mechanisms to track compliance and address shortfalls.

Foster shared standards

Work to harmonise amendments and address legal gaps, especially in jurisdictions resistant to adopting all provisions.

Support unified reporting

Modernise data collection and transparency around violations, implementation status, and best practices.

To ensure the MLC achieves its full potential, international bodies and in particular the ILO and IMO must take a more assertive and centralised role in global maritime governance. While the current framework places significant responsibility on individual states, fragmented enforcement and uneven standards continue to undermine the MLC's objectives.

Ultimately, however, the ILO must be resourced and able to uphold its foundational role as the guardian of decent work. Only the ILO can ensure that seafarers worldwide are not left at the mercy of uneven national policies, but are protected by a consistent, enforceable global standards.

Metrics and mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and accountability

A robust framework of metrics and mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and accountability is fundamental to the effectiveness of the MLC. The MLC stands out among international labour conventions for its comprehensive approach, mandating a coordinated system of certification, inspections, and reporting to ensure compliance not just at adoption, but throughout the lifespan of every vessel and across all jurisdictions (Doumbia-Henry, Devlin & McConnell, 2006). This includes requirements for Maritime Labour Certificates, regular flag state and port state

inspections (guided by the principle of no less favourable treatment, ensuring consistent standards for all seafarers), and accessible onboard complaint procedures, all designed to verify and sustain decent working and living conditions for seafarers. By embedding these systems into both national and international regulatory structures, the MLC promotes transparency, drives continual improvement, and holds all stakeholders (governments, shipowners, and operators) accountable for upholding global standards in maritime labour (Piñeiro, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of the MLC is undermined by weak enforcement. Progressive provisions aimed at protecting seafarers' rights are often rendered ineffective due to the delegation of enforcement responsibilities to individual ratifying states, resulting in inconsistent and unreliable application. Additionally, the tacit acceptance procedure raises questions about the genuine level of international support for the MLC, particularly given the unpopularity of certain provisions. While the Covid-19 pandemic may have exacerbated abandonment issues, it does not fully account for the broader systemic failures in enforcement (Blaskowsky, 2024).

To achieve lasting improvements and genuine accountability under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), a comprehensive and systematic monitoring framework is essential. Key areas include:

- **compliance:** tracking national implementation of amendments, state opt-outs, and outcomes from flag and port state inspections

- **welfare outcomes:** monitoring incidents of abuse, wage issues, shore leave denial, and seafarers' mental health via surveys
- **transparency:** maintaining public registries of ratification statuses and timely reporting of onboard incidents and legal cases
- **dispute resolution:** evaluating the use and effectiveness of grievance and complaint procedures, including resolution rates and timeframes
- **continual review:** conducting regular reviews, audits, and independent monitoring, along with publishing global reports on MLC performance

These monitoring mechanisms should not fall solely on seafarers' organisations, industry associations or various NGOs. For meaningful enforcement, international bodies and in particular the ILO must be empowered to play a stronger, more centralised role in oversight, ensuring uniform accountability across all ratifying states, as stated in the above call for action.

Implementing these measures will ensure that the MLC remains a living instrument of global solidarity, capable of adapting to new challenges while securing enduring rights and dignity for seafarers.

As Piñeiro (2023) highlights, the MLC was established to safeguard seafarers' right to decent employment, in line with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, which prioritises employment creation,

rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Despite these ambitions, the Convention has been criticised for only achieving limited success, with significant decent work deficits still present onboard ships. The challenge appears to lie not merely in enforcement, but in the adequacy of the Convention's underlying standards. Strengthening these standards is essential, and social dialogue will be critical to that effort. While global competition undermines local collective bargaining, the MLC's built-in mechanisms for social dialogue remain a promising avenue, so long as the ILO continues to bring together governments, employers, and workers to advance and uphold decent work in the maritime sector.

Addressing sea blindness through a living Maritime Labour Convention

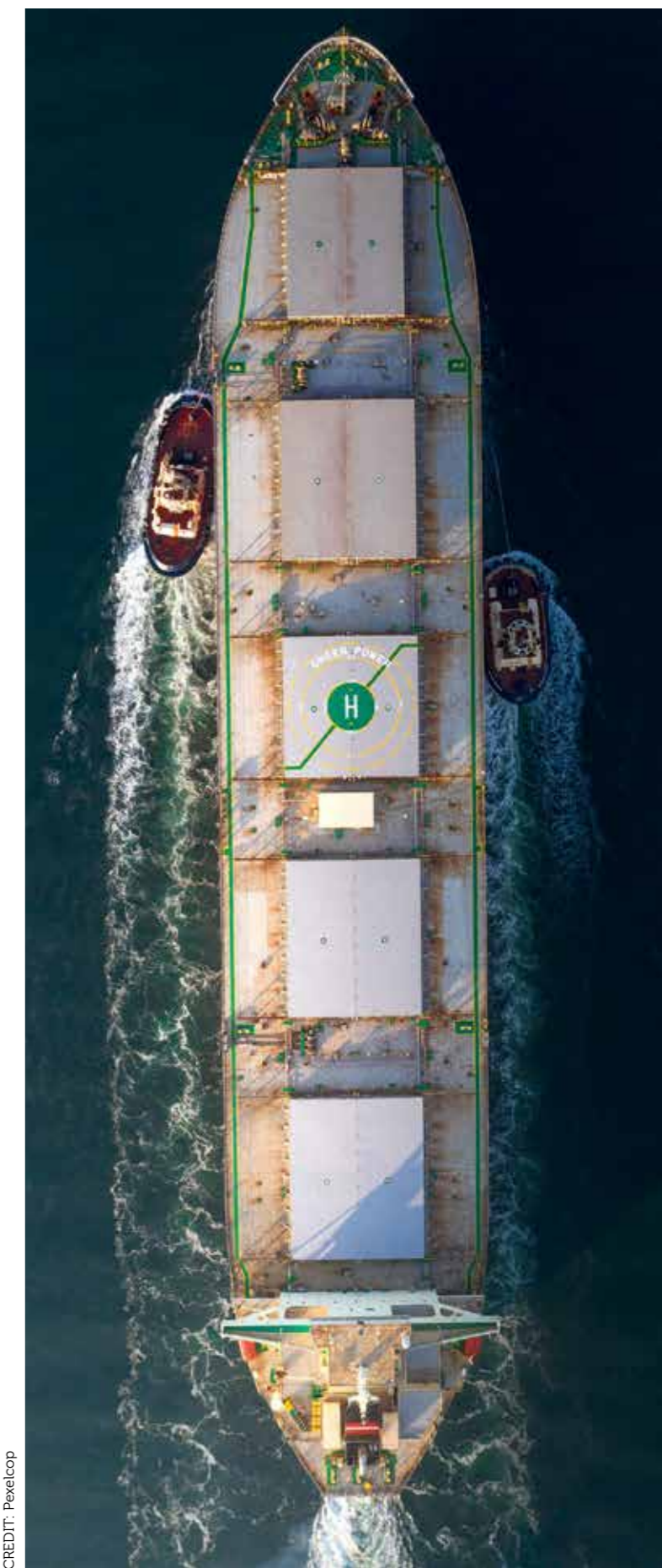
The limited public and political awareness of maritime issues, or sea blindness, makes it harder to address the realities of seafarers' lives. The Covid-19 border closures, which left hundreds of thousands of seafarers stranded at sea and created a humanitarian crisis, starkly exposed the consequences of sea blindness and raised serious concerns about compliance with the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention (De Beukelaer, 2021).

To counter this, the Maritime Labour Convention must remain dynamic and continuously improved. Updating its provisions in line with new challenges,

from technological change to health and safety risks, is key to ensuring that seafarers' rights and wellbeing are properly safeguarded, and that their central role in global trade is fully recognised in policy and practice.

Sea blindness is reinforced by structural features of the shipping industry itself. The widespread use of flags of convenience allows vessels to operate under jurisdictions that lack the will or capacity to enforce high labour standards. This regulatory fragmentation creates uneven conditions for seafarers, obscures accountability, and perpetuates the invisibility of those working at sea. When responsibility is dispersed across multiple actors in multiple jurisdictions, the challenges faced by seafarers are even less likely to reach public or policy attention.

A living Maritime Labour Convention can help to counter these dynamics by promoting stronger enforcement mechanisms and greater transparency across jurisdictions. Continuous improvement of the MLC should focus on closing gaps created by fragmented regulation and ensuring that all flag states, regardless of registry type, uphold consistent and robust standards. By doing so, the MLC not only safeguards seafarers' rights but also challenges the structures that contribute to sea blindness, fostering a more accountable and sustainable global maritime system.



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Appendix 1 Overview of MLC amendments (2014–2025)

Each amendment is built upon prior ones to enhance seafarer welfare, clarify shipowner obligations, and address emerging maritime labour issues.

	Date of adoption	Date of entry into force	Key themes addressed
MLC 2006	23 February 2006	20 August 2013	
2014 Amendments	11 June 2014	18 January 2017	<p>Financial security for abandonment, compensation for death/disability</p> <p>Financial security for seafarers: Shipowners are required to provide financial security to cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> abandonment of seafarers. compensation for death or long-term disability due to occupational injury or illness <p>Documentation: certificates or other documentary evidence of this coverage must be carried onboard.</p>
2016 Amendments	7 June 2016	8 January 2019	<p>Elimination of harassment/bullying, extension of certificate validity</p> <p>Elimination of shipboard harassment and bullying: New requirements to address and prevent harassment and bullying onboard via inclusion in ship management systems and relevant documentation.</p> <p>Certificate validity extension: Allows a five-month extension of the validity of the Maritime Labour Certificate following successful renewal inspection, giving flag administrations time to issue a full-term certificate.</p>
2018 Amendments	5 June 2018	26 December 2020	<p>Protection of rights/wages during captivity due to piracy or armed robbery</p> <p>Seafarer rights during piracy or armed robbery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seafarer employment agreements (SEAs) remain in effect if a seafarer is held captive due to piracy or armed robbery, until release, repatriation, or death wages and other entitlements continue to accrue and must be paid during captivity

Table 1 Timeline and overview of MLC Amendments 2014-2025 (continued)

	Date of adoption	Date of entry into force	Key themes addressed
2022 Amendments	13 May 2022	23 December 2024	<p>Violence/harassment, key worker status, shore leave, repatriation, medical updates</p> <p>Strengthened measures for: Protection against violence and harassment onboard. Recognition of seafarers as key workers for the purposes of their movement and repatriation. Facilitation of shore leave for health and wellbeing. Facilitation of repatriation and adoption of IMO/ILO guidelines for fair treatment. Requirements for updated medical provisions and means of communication onboard.</p>
2025 Amendments	6 June 2025	Late December 2027	<p>Seafarers as key workers; violence/harassment prevention; shore leave; repatriation; fair treatment in detention; shore-based welfare; grievance procedures; updated medical standards</p> <p>The 2025 amendments reflect the continued effort to enhance seafarers' rights, working conditions, and safety. The main topics addressed include:</p> <p>Recognition of seafarers as key workers Formal designation of seafarers as key workers, improving their access to essential services and movement during crises like pandemics.</p> <p>Strengthened protections against violence and harassment Expanded measures to prevent and address violence, harassment, and sexual assault at sea, including mandatory policies for recruitment and onboard procedures.</p> <p>Entitlement to shore leave Seafarers gain a formalised right to non-discriminatory shore leave, elimination of unnecessary visa requirements, and requirement for clear justification if shore leave is denied. Emphasis on maintaining seafarers' health and wellbeing during shore leave.</p>

Appendix 2 Linking strategic priorities to concrete amendments in the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006

	Date of adoption	Date of entry into force	Key themes addressed
2025 Amendments <i>(continued)</i>	6 June 2025	Late December 2027	<p>Facilitation of repatriation Enhanced procedures to guarantee repatriation of seafarers regardless of flag state and without discrimination. Costs covered by shipowners have been explicitly detailed, including travel, accommodation, luggage allowance, and medical care until travel is possible.</p> <p>Fair treatment in detention and maritime accidents Obligations for flag and port states to follow IMO/ILO guidelines for the fair treatment of seafarers detained in connection with alleged crimes or during maritime accidents. Access to proper consular protection for detained seafarers.</p> <p>Improved access to shore-based welfare Requirements ensuring fair treatment and welfare for seafarers detained in foreign ports, and further protections for their occupational safety and health.</p> <p>Confidential and effective grievance procedures Stronger safeguards for onboard complaint handling, confidentiality, and anti-victimization measures, ensuring seafarers can safely report issues.</p> <p>Medical and occupational standards Updates to medical care guidance, ensuring ships maintain the most up-to-date medical information and that responsible persons onboard have access to this guidance.</p>

Rewriting the Future of Maritime Labour: 5 thematic priorities to champion and closely follow	A Rights-Based Roadmap for the MLC's Renewal: corresponding amendment themes to promote and scrutinise
1. STRENGTHENING EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS Secure jobs, fair pay, and income continuity for all seafarers.	Wages and remittances Seafarers employment agreements Repatriation Financial security Retirement savings inclusion
2. IMPROVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELFARE Putting fatigue, connectivity, and mental health at the centre of safety and wellbeing.	Hours of work and rest Time at sea Safe crew levels Entitlement to leave/shore leave Accommodation, food and catering Free wi-fi and social connectivity Mental health access and wellbeing
3. UPGRADING LIVING CONDITIONS Dignified onboard life with decent food, space, and rest.	Accommodation improvements Food standards and access Meditation space and nutrition Tonnage convention impacts
4. EXPANDING RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS Protecting seafarers in crisis, at sea and ashore.	Seafarers' Identity Documents (C185) Occupational health and safety reps Bullying and harassment protections (C190) Right to refuse unsafe work Stronger enforcement of social security (Title 4.5) Protection in pandemics and abandonment cases
5. BUILDING A FAIR AND INCLUSIVE FUTURE Empowering seafarers through equality, training, and just transitions.	Just transition training/upskilling Free training/e-learning access Gender inclusion and youth employment AI and automation adaptation Ban on recovery of training costs Career entry support (apprenticeships/cadetships)

Appendix 3 Information about which countries have not (yet) accepted or have opted out of specific amendments to the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC)¹⁵

Acceptance of amendments of 2014 to the MLC, 2006

Date of entry into force: 18 January 2017

Country	Status	Note
Albania	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Bangladesh	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Belize	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Cabo Verde	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
China	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Ecuador	Not in force	Ecuador ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2014 The amendments enter into force for Ecuador on 04 Apr 2026
Fiji	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Gabon	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Jordan	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Maldives	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Curaçao	Not applicable	Curaçao has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
Pakistan	Not in force	Pakistan ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2014. The amendments will enter into force for Pakistan on 14 Mar 2026
Thailand	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance

Acceptance of amendments of 2016 to the MLC, 2006

Date of entry into force: 8 January 2019

Country	Status	Note
Albania	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	Not applicable	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Djibouti	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Ecuador	Not in force	Ecuador ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2016. The amendments will enter into force for Ecuador on 04 Apr 2026
Gambia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Grenada	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Indonesia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Jamaica	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Lebanon	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Pakistan	Not in force	Pakistan ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2016. The amendments will enter into force for Pakistan on 14 Mar 2026
Slovakia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance

¹⁵ ILO NORMLEX database: normlex.ilo.org

Acceptance of amendments of 2018 to the MLC, 2006

Date of entry into force: 26 December 2020

Country	Status	Note
Brazil	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	Not applicable	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Cook Islands	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Djibouti	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Ecuador	Not in force	Ecuador ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2018. The amendments will enter into force for Ecuador on 04 Apr 2026
Ethiopia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
France	Not in force	France has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
– New Caledonia	Not applicable	New Caledonia has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
Gambia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Grenada	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Iceland	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	Not in force	Netherlands has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
– Curaçao	Not applicable	Curaçao has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
– Tokelau	Not applicable	
Pakistan	Not in force	Pakistan ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2018 The amendments will enter into force for Pakistan on 14 Mar 2026
Senegal	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Slovenia	Not in force	Slovenia has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance – Article XV, para. 8, a)
Sudan	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
British Virgin Islands	Not applicable	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Falkland Islands (Malvinas) *	Not applicable	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
United Republic of Tanzania	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance

* A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning the sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

Acceptance of amendments of 2022 to the MLC, 2006

Date of entry into force: 23 December 2024

Country	Status	Note
Chile	In force	The amendments of 2022 to the MLC, 2006 have been accepted and will enter into force for Chile on 23 Dec 2025 (Article XV, para.8,b)
Comoros	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Ecuador	Not in force	Ecuador ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2022. The amendments will enter into force for Ecuador on 04 Apr 2026
Egypt	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
France	Not in force	France has indicated that it will be bound by the amendments to Standards 1.4, A3.2, A4.1 and A4.3 (Standard A4.3 and Guideline B4.3.5) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance (Article XV, para. 8, a) The amendments relating to Standards A2.5.1, A3.1, A4.3, Appendices A2-I and A4-I have been accepted and entered into force for France on 23 Dec 2024
Georgia	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Guinea-Bissau	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Iraq	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Jamaica	In force	Jamaica has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance (Article XV, para. 8, a)
Madagascar	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance
Pakistan	Not in force	Pakistan ratified the MLC, 2006, as amended in 2022 The amendments will enter into force for Pakistan on 14 Mar 2026
Portugal	In force	Portugal has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance (Article XV, para. 8, a)
Slovenia	In force	Slovenia has indicated that it will be bound by the amendment(s) only after a subsequent express notification of their acceptance (Article XV, para. 8, a)
Syrian Arab Republic	Not in force	Awaiting declaration of acceptance

Acceptance of amendments of 2025 to the MLC, 2006

Expected date of entry into force: 23 December 2027

Formal disagreement period until 23 June 2027



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Estelle Arnette

About the Nautilus Federation

The Nautilus Federation is a group of like-minded trade unions in shipping and inland waterways transport that have come together to improve and expand the services they offer to their members.

Our mission is to foster the development of a strategic partnership between member unions with relationships that are focused on mutual respect, trust and a shared vision for the success of our common understanding of progressive trade unionism, organising and professional support to our respective members.

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CO-Sea (Denmark)

FGTE-CFDT (France)

Finnish Engineers' Association

Finnish Ship's Officers' Union

International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots (USA)

Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (USA)

Merchant Navy Officers' Guild – Hong Kong

Nautilus International (CH)

Nautilus International (NL)

Nautilus International (UK)

New Zealand Merchant Service Guild

Norwegian Union of Marine Engineers

Officers' Union of International Seamen

Seafarers' Union of Croatia

Singapore Maritime Officers' Union

Singapore Organisation of Seamen

Sjöbefälsföreningen – Maritime Officers' Association (Sweden)

Unión de Capitanes y Oficiales de Cubierta (Panama)

Unión de Ingenieros Marinos (Panama)

Nautilus Federation contacts

Main office

Gewerkschaftshaus

Rebgasse 1

4005 Basel

Switzerland

T: +44 (0)20 8989 6677

E: enquiries@nautilusint.org

If you have an urgent matter please contact us using the 24/7 link on the website.

Singapore Office

75 Jellicoe Road

#04-01 Wavelink Building

Singapore 208738

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