

# Shore leave and abandonment - we need to do better for seafarers

Recent reports show crew having difficulty accessing shore leave and 2024 to be the worst year on record for seafarer abandonment.

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Credit: Chris Thornton via Unsplash

As a journalist covering the shipping industry you tend to see the two extremes of [seafarer welfare](#). At one end is the investments by quality owners and managers in gleaming newbuildings with investments in connectivity, catering and social activity spaces, and at the other are seafarers trapped onboard aging rust buckets, and in the worst cases left abandoned, unpaid and starving thousands of miles away from home.

The latest reports from both the quarterly Seafarer Happiness Index highlighting the difficulties in taking shore leave and the by the International Transport Workers Federation's (ITF) frankly shocking figures for seafarer abandonment in 2024 make depressing reading. Both underscore that there is still much work to be done to ensure the mental and physical welfare of those at the sharp end of world trade and keep goods, and therefore the global economy flowing.

The pandemic saw seafarers imprisoned on their vessels unable to get off for shore leave or even to be relieved at the end of their contracts, despite all the calls for seafarers to be recognised as key workers most states did not do this and unfortunately shore leave remains an issue today.

The issue of the inability to take shore leave was highlighted in the latest Seafarers Happiness Index for the fourth quarter of 2024 produced by the [Mission to Seafarers](#) in partnership with Idwal and NorthStandard. Overall, the index fell to 6.91 points from 7.16 points compared to Q3 2024 and when it came to shore leave the index dropped to 6.12 points in Q4 last year compared 6.52 in the previous quarter.

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The quarterly report for the index said shore leave “remains a significant challenge for seafarers” with systematic barriers such as port policies to security concerns. It described seafarers as having “palpable frustration, even anger” at port operators with certain ports seen as making the process of shore leave unnecessarily difficult even though there is a legal obligation to provide shore leave.

Seafarers face gates shut to nearby town centres, movement around terminals limited to buses of uncertain schedules, and frequently dirty when they do turn up, as well in some cases disembarkation fees and other financial barriers.

And its not all on the port side with operational constraints of vessels on tight schedules, inspections, cargo operations and maintenance resulting in a lack of shore leave opportunities.

Shore leave should not be seen as a privilege and regulations such as the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) are meant to ensure seafarers get access to much needed time away from the vessel where they live and work, but clearly this is not happening in many cases.

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This is an issue that affects a large number of seafarers and as the Seafarers Happiness Index report states there is a pressing need for shipping companies and port authorities to prioritise shore for seafarers.

More appalling than the restrictions on shore leave are the sharply rising numbers of abandoned seafarers left stranded often experiencing months without wages, extremely poor living conditions, and shortages of food and drinking water. In the worst cases crew can be left stranded for years on end.

The ITF described seafarer abandonment as “spiralling out of control” with the number crew abandoned in 2024 nearly doubling 3,133 compared to 1,676 in 2023. According to the ITF 312 vessels were abandoned last year compared to 132 in 2023, with some 28 vessels abandoning crew on more than one occasion.

The issue of seafarer abandonment is by no means a new one and it seems little is being done to stem the problem with unscrupulous shipowners exploiting lax regulations and abandoning crews with impunity and leaving over \$20 million in unpaid wages. Of that figure the hard work of ITF has recovered \$10.4 million to date.

As Stephen Cotton, ITF’s General Secretary, puts it: “The scandalous rise in reported cases of seafarer abandonment exposes the ugly truth of an industry which has relied on unchecked exploitative practices and lack of global regulation for far too long. But the solution lies in plain sight: better regulation, enforcement and accountability from governments.”

The abandonment of seafarers should not be happening at all, let alone be sharply on the rise, and those responsible need to be held accountable and punished.

Both the denial or obstruction of shore leave and the abandonment of seafarers show a lack of care for the basic human rights of our seafarers, and the industry, governments, and regulatory authorities need to do better.