

Shipping & Offshore News

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW NEWSLETTER

By *Steve Todd*, National Secretary

Welcome to the first of what we intend to be a regular Shipping and Offshore Newsletter, following the decision by the Shipping and Offshore Committee to relaunch this communication. With contributions from the Shipping and Offshore Committee, the assistant national secretary and myself your national secretary.

As this is the first real opportunity since I have started, what I hope will be my last term of office, I want to start by thanking all branches, activists, close friends and colleagues, for your continued support, over the last ten years. I look forward to repaying the faith you have placed in me yet again, in the five years that lay ahead.

It was extremely pleasing to get all the branch nominations this time around, I am most grateful and proud to serve you. Without such support it would not have been possible.

Defending Jobs

Foreland announced earlier this year that the two ships that they operate on commercial charter were to be sold off, claiming there was no work for them. The union has been trying to negotiate a decent package that would enable some volunteers to apply for voluntary redundancy while at the same time lobbying everyone in connection with these ships to keep them on as a viable concern.

We have now been advised that the vessels will be sold in April 2014 as opposed to finishing this December. It may be only a temporary reprieve for the jobs but it's four months more breathing space to convince the powers that be that these ships and crews are still needed. My energy will be spent using industrial and political attempt to keep these vessels.

RFA members will be getting frustrated at the obvious delay over pay yet again and rightly so. It's all very well being told we are restricted by treasury and government freezes on increases, try telling that to the members who rightly don't deserve to be left in this position every year. We

wrote to the commodore and told him that we were not prepared to wait any longer and if no positive response is received by 1 November we would find ourselves in dispute. We have now notified the company that a dispute situation exists between us and are preparing to ballot.

We are also not prepared to see bonus payments divvied up the way they have been in the past, where an officer gets almost double of what a rating gets: the cost of essential items is the same for all, regardless of rank. There are many other issues going on in RFA at the moment, such as TSOC's, and I know Ian Boyle and the working party have been striving hard to ensure we get the right outcome on this. Whilst there has been a temporary hold on progressing this matter further, it won't be long before they start pressing the flesh again, which means we need to prepare for a long battle. We will need the membership behind us like never before.

P&O Dover members have just rejected the company's proposals on harmonisation with a 77% majority in a referendum, which only goes to show, one size does not fit all and whilst our members might have accepted this in other ports they clearly have rejected it in Dover: that's democracy for you. After several long hard months of negotiations it was agreed to put this to the workforce by both the union and the employer. We should all respect that decision and move on, we have offered the company the chance to reopen discussions and the ball is in their court now.

Training

Much has been said of late about lack of training for ratings and much has been promised. RMT have raised it at every meeting with the last five shipping ministers and also when we met employers, yet nothing seemed to materialise. Well we have had a break through, with access easy now for the employers to tap into government funding for the much needed Ratings

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Apprenticeship Training Scheme. What's needed now is a will by the employers to take it up and at every opportunity we make the case for them to do so. One such company – DFDS – has taken the opportunity and they now have six young people in the scheme at present, who will soon qualify and be at sea. I commend and applaud DFDS for this imitative and when speaking to the HR manager and the CEO recently in Copenhagen, I made the case for this to be expanded and remain very optimistic. Other company's need to follow suit!

Likewise, Cal-Mac in Scotland have embarked on a similar project thanks to the persistence of the Port Committee, Dan Henderson and Brian Reynolds in particular, along with old George Lonie the WIP Chairman. They have done a remarkable job in convincing the employer to take on 10 people, and enrol them in South Tyneside college this autumn. There were over a thousand applicants for these apprenticeships.

Bibby's have also got three ratings undergoing training at the moment, some will say that's only a total of 20 but it's 20 more than we have had for years and it's something to build on and that's the job in hand.

Shipping BGM 2014

The dates have been set for both the offshore and Shipping BGM's for next year, Offshore BGM is 12th and 13th May and Shipping is 14, 15 and 16 May.

All branches have now been notified and the closing dates for nominations and resolutions have been set. You should contact your branch secretaries and get your nominations and resolutions in as soon as possible. The last shipping BGM was not very well attended so it would be good to see more interest and more topics for discussion this time around, don't say you haven't had enough notice and I look forward to seeing delegates there.



MARITIME CHARITIES

Mark Carden, Assistant National Secretary, gives the facts about charities that support seafarers

There are three grant giving maritime charities which give money and help to seafarers in distress, whether they are working or retired or seafarers' dependants.

Seafarers UK

Seafarers UK is the largest with a £40m portfolio, which also includes some RN and RM activities, but mainly Merchant Navy. Seafarers UK give out grants to organisations such as Care Ashore, formerly known as Springbok, a convalescence and residential estate in Surrey of which RMT general secretary, Bob Crow, is chairman. Seafarers UK also give substantial grants to the likes of Mission to Seafarers and SAIL (Seafarers Advice & Information Line), a fairly new but highly successful organisation set up by Citizens Advice Bureau specifically for merchant seamen, working or retired. They give advice on everything from debt management, housing, health, legal and benefit

rights. We highly recommend this service to anybody who needs advice.

Merchant Navy Welfare Board

The Merchant Navy Welfare Board (MNWB) is the second largest and has a portfolio of £12m. They give grants to groups and individuals. This charity used to own all the Merchant Navy hotels around the UK. They give substantial amounts to Seamen's Mission and their fleet of vehicles around all ports. They have also recently set up a Merchant Navy Fund with Seafarers UK, specifically to help projects for MN seafarers, their families, and the wider maritime society.

Seamen's Hospital Society

Seamen's Hospital Society (SHS) have a portfolio of £2.5m and give grants to individuals who may need "one off" support. These grants range from funeral expenses for

families to washing machines, rent arrears, carpets, mattresses and short holiday breaks.

SHS supports the Dreadnought unit at St Thomas's hospital, which is free and offers accelerated access to medical treatment by top consultants. This provision is mainly for working seafarers to get back to work ASAP. However dependants and retired members can also access this useful facility. There is also access to free dental treatment.

These charities are there for you and your dependants and have a combined portfolio of nearly £55m. RMT have trustees on the governing bodies of all these charities and therefore have input to how grants are distributed. If anybody needs assistance, or knows anybody who is retired who needs assistance, please contact RMT for details.



THE SHIPPING & OFFSHORE COMMITTEE

By Daz Procter, EC Member for Shipping Region 3

I have been on the executive now for almost two years. Being part-time in the job it takes time to settle into the role and takes a great deal of personal organisation to balance the demands of the role with a full time job and other roles within the machinery of the union. Nevertheless it is a very satisfying but demanding role.

As the Shipping and Offshore Committee we need to ensure that we are productive in our aims and objectives, that we are servicing our members, visiting ships, campaigning for jobs, campaigning against shipping companies utilising low cost labour on our shores and organising our workplaces to a membership level that gives us an appetite to demand that bit more of the employer: that won't come as a gift but through good organisation.

Branch Structure

Key to all of the above of course is the branch structure. It's safe to say that many shipping branches are struggling for numbers at meetings so very little is coming forward from those branches at the moment. That is something that we have to look at, and I know that South West and South Wales shipping branch have held a few branch meetings onboard RFA vessels. Southampton shipping branch will be looking to do more, especially within the RFA, but also in companies such as Nerc where the ideas and concerns can be taken forward to a full branch meeting whilst getting more people involved and active. Recently, the general secretary sent a circular to all branches and regional councils asking for ideas on the structure of the union and how can we improve our organising. Do we need to change things to better improve the service we give onboard vessels for seafarers and offshore workers? If so, how?

Against flags of convenience

Many of you will know that we have been campaigning against Condor ferries and flags of convenience over the past 12 months or so, and it was great to see support from shipping branches from around the country and general grades branches from the south of England. The momentum has slowed a little on this but it has not gone away and we will continue to fight for rates of pay in line with UK rates and roster patterns in line with that of UK pattern.

We want employment opportunities for local labour and an end to exploitation of seafarers. Condor are obviously not the only shipping company utilising this practice and we need to look at other companies and potential campaigns both where we have agreements and where we don't.

We must also consider campaigning to highlight the role of the MCA and the fact that they promote low cost labour models in exchange for shipping companies flying the red ensign.

Should we continue to be shafted or highlight the fact that a government department is promoting the use of low cost labour rather than its own constituents or the national minimum wage level of this country?

My view is that we get out there amongst it and aim for the stars and hope we get a few concessions along the way and secure a better future for our seafarers.

Health & Safety

Another major concern of mine within the shipping and offshore industries is health and safety, and on the 25th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster, in which 167 people died I find it concerning to say the least that the HSE have withdrawn the offshore safety division and created a new division to look after the "energy" industries health and safety.

Coupled with my concerns in the offshore sector is the exercising of our legislative rights locally on board vessels. Whilst the Tory government is attacking the health and safety rights of land based workers and the offshore workers through cuts, seafarers and this union need to up our game and start utilising the powers that we have to our advantage in an effort to better protect our members and change the current practices onboard a lot of vessels when it comes to safety.

RFA & Recruitment

The RFA remains to be under constant pressure as do all public sector workers and our branch assistant secretary and full time convenor Ian Boyle has been doing a remarkable job of late, visiting many vessels, representing many members in disciplinaries, and along with our branch recruitment and retention officer Kevin Jewell they are steadily increasing the membership numbers. Our branch has grown by over 10% in the last 10 months but more importantly we are seeing more and more members becoming active and participating in the education system, and foundations are being built by Ian that will hopefully stand us in good stead going forward. Ian has recently identified a large number of non-members in the RFA and we will be looking to recruit them into the union and make those vessels stronger.

It was good to see Southampton Shipping Branch working with Dover Shipping Branch recently on board DFDS vessels when the assistant national secretary, Mark Carden, was accompanied by Kevin Jewell on a recruitment exercise. The closer the relationship between branches, the stronger we will become as a grade.

We have to maximise our presence in the workplace with all the attacks that are taking place, build teams, utilise the skills of our members on board vessels and take ownership because doing nothing is not an option and relying on others is an unsatisfactory approach if we want results.

Most of you will know that I have my own Facebook page - Daz Procter RMT Shipping Council of Executive - where some good debate and information can be found. During one of those debates it was interesting to read that over 40 seafarers from all over the country agreed that we needed to improve our visibility as a union on board vessels. For my part I have been promoting this and I totally agree - this our bread and butter and improving the presence not only gives members confidence but puts those in managerial and supervisory positions thinking they can't treat our members on the back foot!

We can't do any of the above without you, we can do all of the above with you! Safe seas and solidarity with all RMT members.

OFFSHORE ROUNDUP

By Jimmy Laing, *EC Member for Offshore Energy*

It is with great regret that I have to open the offshore part of the newsletter, with the news that one of our members, Sister Sara Darnley, lost her life alongside three others in a helicopter accident that occurred just off Sumburgh airport in the Shetland Islands at 17.17 hours on Friday 23 August. Initial investigations have concluded that there were no technical or mechanical issues with the helicopter involved, which was a Super Puma L2 model. The EC225, L and L1 versions of the Super Puma have therefore returned to passenger transit, whilst the L2 model will be limited to freight, maintenance and training flights. The Norwegian sector has resumed flights of all models of the Super Puma's.

COTA

The COTA (catering) wage deal for 2013-14 is now in force, as the second part of a two year deal agreed between RMT and sister unions. The deal is 3.8% (June 2013 RPI + 0.5%) including wage rise, Christmas and New Year

payments rising to £100 for each day, an extra £5 on the top two bands of travel and life assurance rising to £75,000.

Divers & Dive Superintendents

An offshore divers and dive superintendents' referendum on transferring personnel to the PAYE system closed at the end of October with the vast majority opting to go onto PAYE. We will be seeking a meeting with the relevant government department's as to what to do next.

Regional Organisers

At the recent branch meeting of the Offshore Energy branch, we had three nominees for each of the positions of Relief Regional Organiser and Regional Organiser Scotland positions. All six applicants gave excellent presentations as to their aims to our members. After some discussion, the successful candidates for the nomination from the Offshore Energy branch

were Sean McGowan (relief regional organiser) and Gordon Martin (regional organiser Scotland).

Piper Alpha

On Saturday 6 July a gathering of Offshore Energy branch members led by regional organiser, Jake Molloy, attended the remembrance service on the 25th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster. An RAF Sea King helicopter started proceedings with a fly past. The Rev. Gordon Craig, chaplain to the oil & gas industry delivered a poignant service. It was fitting that the sun shone brightly on such a day of reflection for the many workers who lost their lives and are still fondly remembered by their families and fellow workers. The garden of remembrance looked a fitting tribute with thousands of rose bushes in bloom and the memorial having had a full makeover.

A wreath was laid at the memorial on the union's behalf by Lorna Robertson.



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