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Coronavirus makes it impossible to effectively change seafaring crews, affects nearly a million

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A crisis threatens to grind international shipping down to a trickle, as seafarers who crew the tankers and cruise ships find themselves working far past their contract times, or stranded, or held up in the liminal space between borders.^[1] The process known as crew change, in which crews that have been at sea for months are replaced by new crews, has nearly ground to a halt.

The culprit is COVID-19 and the social distancing guidelines governments around the world are implementing to control the spread of the virus. For crews that man ships, this means that they are not able to disembark due to local governments' fear of infection nor are able to go home because of COVID-19-related restrictions, lockdowns and bottlenecks. International Chamber of Shipping warned United Nations that, if nothing is done, the number of "adversely affected" crew members could reach 1 million by the end of the year.^[2]

The effect on global supply chains cannot be overstated. If crews are unable to change and are forced to remain either on ships for months past the contractual agreement, or stranded in ports away from their homes, they will begin to succumb to the strain of fatigue, loneliness, anxiety and fear of an uncertain future. "In a June survey by the seafarers' union, many crew members on extended contracts said exhaustion was affecting their ability to focus. Some compared themselves to prisoners or slaves, according to the survey,"^[3] and, according to International Transport Workers' Federation General Secretary Stephen Cotton, some "seafarers feared blacklisting by employers if they complained about a situation 'bordering on forced labour.'"^[4]

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