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# St Kitts and Nevis registry takes flak in triple abandonment case



Sam Chambers • October 30, 2023 0 387 2 minutes read



The St Kitts and Nevis ship registry stands accused of evading its responsibility to more than 30 seafarers by deregistering three ships on which they are abandoned, a tactic which has been roundly condemned by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

Seafarers on the Med Sea Eagle and the Med Sea Fox anchored off the off Sharjah in the UAE since July, and others on the Med Sea Lion in West Africa have been abandoned by owners Sea Lion Shipping, having not been paid for months and left without support essential to their wellbeing. The latter ship was found to be carrying a huge haul of cocaine in April this year. They are all running low on food and water and many are in urgent need of medical help. One, from the Med Sea Eagle, became so distressed by the situation that they attempted to take their own life. ITF inspectors report that the mental well-being of all these seafarers is poor.

The St Kitts and Nevis flag has confirmed to the ITF that it has deregistered all three ships in response to their abandonment, but it has not – after more than a week – come back on a request to explain why it did this while seafarers were still on board and in peril.

“St Kitts and Nevis is playing fast and loose with international law,” said David Heindel, ITF seafarers’ section chair and president of the Seafarers International Union. “It is morally unacceptable to leave these seafarers to rot on stateless vessels. By merely deregistering these vessels, it should not relieve them of their obligations. If it’s that easy, what good do our international instruments provide in protecting seafarers.

The Caribbean island group has ratified the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC – 2006) which lays out responsibilities on the welfare of ships’ crews, including in the case where they abandoned by the shipowners. This makes it very clear that in the event that shipowners do not support seafarers, and insurers are not forthcoming, the flag state takes on the obligation for seafarers’ wellbeing.

In the case of these three ships, Sea Lion Shipping claims to be in financial difficulty and insurers have been unresponsive to the ITF’s demands to step in. Under the MLC, that leaves the seafarers’ lives in the hands of the flag state.

“I find it unbelievable that the flag takes the fees for registering ships but, at the first sign of trouble, it ducks out,” said Heindel.

“This case throws into sharp relief the lunacy of the Flag of Convenience system,” said Steve Trowsdale, ITF inspectorate coordinator. “Countries like St Kitts and Nevis see registering vessels as a money-making opportunity but do not put the resources in place to properly regulate their ships. The world’s economies absolutely rely on ships like these, yet they continue to tolerate this flawed system. In doing so, they are continually putting the lives of seafarers at risk.”

The same flag has received plenty of flak for the volume of so-called shadow tankers it had on its fleet in the first year of the war between Russia and Ukraine.

**#Seafarers**