

ITF highlights Bulgarian 'ship of shame'

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ITF

The International Transport Workers Federation (the ITF) continues to identify shocking cases of crew mistreatment, wage theft, and deplorable conditions aboard ships operating in Australian waters, with the latest example in Mackay Harbour involving the Eleen Sofia, run by Ellen Marine from Bulgaria.

The 2008-built supramax is currently under arrest by the Australian Border Force and has been relocated to Gladstone where it will remain until at least May 13.

“The ITF’s inspectors have met this ship of shame at a number of Australian ports to check crew welfare and safety, examine payment records, and enforce the Maritime Labour Convention standards for provisioning aboard the ship,” said the Australian Inspectorate Coordinator, Ian Bray.

In late April, the ITF identified that the crew had no access to food aboard the ship as the provisions had been depleted. The ship’s owner has repeatedly failed to reprovision the ship with basic sustenance and human essentials.

The ITF alleges that the Eleen Sofia has a demonstrably shocking track record of poor maintenance and unbearable living conditions for crew aboard the ship.

In addition to starving their crew, while at anchor in Bangladesh the Liberian-flagged ship was reportedly without air-conditioning in the crew cabin areas for over three months, making it impossible for any crew member to get to sleep during sweltering overnight conditions.

In February this year, the ITF became aware of overdue or unpaid wages while the Eleen Sofia was docked in Port Adelaide and later in Portland, Victoria. The ITF Inspectorate was able to fix the wages and lack of provisions at that time but the ship has since left Australia, spent time in other nations’ ports before now returning to Australia in the port of Mackay, Queensland, where the same issues have once again been identified by the Australian inspectorate.

There are also significant unanswered questions about the disappearance and presumed death of the ship’s cook, who went overboard at an anchorage in South China.

“Shockingly, the ITF is having to fight the company now for compensation to be paid to the family of the lost seafarer, which goes to show that life is cheap aboard these ships of shame and ship owners will do everything they can to avoid their moral and legal obligations to the people who work for them, or their families,” said Bray.

"The owners of this ship are a disgrace to the industry but they are not alone in their flagrant disregard for human rights or human decency aboard their vessels.

Unfortunately these stories are common, and the prevalence of human rights abuses aboard ships that operate in Australian waters, working for Australian industry and delivering goods for our community, should alarm every Australian," Bray added.

The ITF is now working closely with the regulators, the Australian Border Force and local port authorities in Queensland to ensure the crew remaining aboard the ship while it is under arrest have access to decent, healthy living conditions, shore leave, medical attention and potentially repatriation while the issues with the ship and the reasons for its arrest are worked through.

The ITF, through its inspectorate program throughout Australia's network of mainland ports, uncovered more than A\$30m (\$19.76m) in stolen wages during the last calendar year.