

Brussels, 21-01-2021

OPEN LETTER

To: Heads of State and Government of EU Member States
Copied to: President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Council, Charles Michel
Commissioner for Health, Stella Kyriakides
Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean
Permanent Representations of the EU

Subject: EU Member States must enable crew changes to take place without further delays and prioritise seafarers for vaccination

Dear Heads of State and Government,

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented crew change crisis, impacting upon hundreds of thousands of seafarers, with some approaching two years stuck at sea. There is real concern that, under new restrictions, the situation will worsen rather than improve.

Seafarers are frontline workers in the maritime industry that carries 90% of global trade. They are, therefore, critical in keeping nations supplied with vital goods. Increasingly in 2021, this will include vaccine doses, personal protective equipment and syringes, to inoculate populations and defeat the virus.

On the occasion of the Informal Videoconference of the European Council on 21 January 2021 we, the European Social partners for maritime transport, would like to thank all the EU Member States and European Commission for the commitment over the past months to enable crew changes to happen in EU Member States. We also welcome the heightened efforts put forward by the Commission in its Communication of 19 January 2021 on 'A united front to beat COVID-19'.

However, at this important juncture in the fight against the virus, we call on EU Heads of State and Government to ensure that seafarers are designated as key workers in all EU Member States and given priority access to COVID-19 vaccines. Moreover, we call on EU leaders to continue to acknowledge the needs of seafarers by ensuring that any enhanced national restrictive measures provide for exemptions for seafarers and maritime personnel.

Seafarers to be designated as key workers and given priority access for COVID-19 vaccines

The EU and international institutions (UN, IMO and ILO) have recognised the crucial role of seafarers and maritime workers in global transport and trade. They called upon States to designate seafarers and maritime personnel as key workers to ensure their travel is facilitated, thereby enabling crew changes, repatriations and medical assistance to take place. They have also called upon States to recognise that, in view of their important role, they should be considered within the priority groups for early COVID-19 vaccination.

While thanking all the Member States that have designated seafarers as key workers, we urge that all Member States designate seafarers as key workers without any further delay. We strongly call on EU Member States and EU Institutions to ensure that seafarers and maritime personnel should, in line with the key worker status, continue to be exempted from restrictions being put in place, like quarantine and pre-arrival testing requirements. This to ensure they can travel to and from EU Member States for the purpose of crew changes, shore leave or repatriation.

We support the Commission's calls on Member States to accelerate the roll-out of vaccination across the EU and the key target dates identified. However, we greatly regret that the Commission had omitted to reiterate its recommendation of 15 October 2020 to prioritise key workers, including seafarers. We strongly urge all EU Member States to designate seafarers as a category of persons to be given priority access to COVID-19 vaccinations. This is essential not only because of their crucial importance of their role in the functioning of supply chains, but also in recognition of the heightened infection risk they face because of the extensive travel they undertake to join ships and for repatriation.

Even with priority access to vaccinations, it will take some time before all seafarers will be vaccinated. During this period seafarers and maritime personnel should not be subjected to any requirement to have been vaccinated for entry to or travel within the EU.

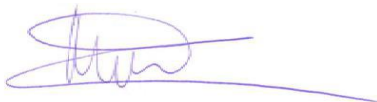
EU leadership and solidarity sought

We urge the EU Member States and EU Institutions to show 'leadership and international solidarity' in tackling this stage of the global fight against the pandemic. We ask that they explore exerting diplomatic influence with third countries to achieve international recognition for seafarers as key workers and thereby ensuring that 'all' seafarers are prioritised for vaccination.

Medical attention for seafarers to be safeguarded

In this second wave and beyond, we have seen the reinstatement of certain restrictions and a lack of medical attention for seafarers who have tested positive for COVID-19. We urge Transport Ministers to continue to call on colleagues responsible for health and home affairs to ensure seafarers' travel to and from vessels and their right to medical attention. Flag states have a particularly important role to play here in leading by example in facilitating crew changes in their ports and supporting their flagged vessels in efforts to undertake crew changes and repatriations globally.

Yours sincerely,



Martin Dorsman
Secretary General ECSA



Livia Spera
Acting General Secretary ETF