

Maritime Labour Convention Seminar – 9-10 November 2009

Introduction

Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, a very warm welcome to this Maritime Labour Convention seminar, which has been organised by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency, along with their partners in the Department for Transport, UK Chamber of Shipping, Nautilus and the RMT. It is a measure of the importance of this convention, and its implications for everyone in the industry, that there is such a turnout (indeed I am informed it is a capacity crowd) for what I hope is going to be a very informative meeting.

We are particularly grateful to Mr Paul Clark, UK Minister for Shipping, who has made time in his busy schedule to provide us with the keynote address this morning. We have a slight change of programme in that the Minister, who has an urgent appointment in Cardiff, is going to deliver his keynote address before we hear from the Tripartite working group speakers. You might think that this is more logical anyway. It is also particularly good to welcome somebody who might be thought of as the chief architect of the convention in Mrs Cleo Doumbia-Henry of the International Labour Organisation.

Before we begin, just a few housekeeping points and a safety announcement.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, it is now three years since the MLC, which has been described as “the most ambitious convention ever, covering the modern realities of working conditions aboard a 21st century ship” was adopted in Geneva. It was the product of several years of very hard work, but the final document was supported unanimously by its tripartite stakeholders - governments, seafarers and shipowners alike. It has been designed to become the “fourth pillar” in the international regulatory regime that governs quality shipping – along with the International Maritime Organisation’s SOLAS, MARPOL and STCW conventions. And in conjunction with these other important conventions, it is global in scope and ambition, providing a level playing field in which all parts of the international shipping industry can operate and flourish.

Looking at what went on in Geneva as the convention was fashioned, from the safe distance of my perspective, it seemed an almost impossible task, the tripartite members faced in their working groups with the need to update and consolidate the contents of nearly 70 earlier conventions and recommendations, some of them dating back almost to the days of sail, some in force but of doubtful relevance, others clearly overtaken by the passage of time and maritime technology.

But somehow, with enormous effort and a lot of midnight oil, and goodwill, it was done, and a whole raft of fragmented labour standards have been fashioned into a single convention that can provide comprehensive rights and protection at work for the global seafaring population of one and a quarter million seafarers. It has been designed for global application, produced in a way that people can actually understand it, and designed so that it can be regularly updated, so that we will no longer have people scratching their heads over yellowing, 80 year old documents, wondering what their authors had really intended.

Crucially, it has also been designed for a uniformity of enforcement, so that the globe-girdling merchant ship will not meet different standards and ambiguous interpretations as it moves from port to port and country to country.

We might also consider, that in the arrival of the Maritime Labour Convention, just when it did in 2006, it has been more than fortuitous, at a time when the world fleet was growing apace, and there was concern approaching desperation as to how on earth all these ships were going to be manned.

There has been tremendous introspection within the industry as to how to replenish an ageing seafaring workforce, how to compete for the quality people the industry needs and is going to need more, how to promote awareness and understanding about an essential industry that seems nevertheless to be invisible and only noticed, when something sinks or spills oil.

So you might think that an up to the minute Maritime Labour Convention, setting minimum standards, addressing conditions of employment, accommodation, recreational facilities, food and catering, health protection, medical care, welfare and social security protection, is hugely timely.

Once implemented and enforced, it surely presents to the world the face of a modern, industry where social provisions for the workforce are seen to be central. It somehow makes the invocation of the IMO Secretary-General to “go to sea”, and supported by all industry organisations, that much easier. We are no longer an industry where, upon close examination, some of our working conditions find themselves decreed by conventions that are 80 years old! Come and join us, in a modern, socially responsible, essential industry, we can say, with a clear conscience, once the MLC is up and running!

There is surely something for everyone in this convention, and indeed there would not have been the unanimity in its adoption, had not this been so. It is good for shipowners, it is good for seafarers and good for governments. It ticks positive and desirable boxes, about simplification, common sense, universal application, social responsibility, protection, compliance and verification.

And this, ladies and gentlemen are the bare bones of the treat we have for us over the next couple of days, as a range of experts are going to explain the new convention, what it will mean and how it is to be implemented in practice.

But first, as I have explained, it is my great pleasure to introduce the Minister for Shipping Mr Paul Clark MP, to give us our keynote address.