



Evidence suggests that, in the interests of seafarers' safety, cargo handling is best left to trained port workers says

Erol Kahveci, of the Seafarers' International Research Centre

TRADITIONALLY there has been mutual support and solidarity between seafarers and dock workers. However, recent developments in shipping suggest that seafarers are getting more involved in cargo handling. This creates welfare issues for seafarers as the practice prevents them taking shore leave and, of course, there are further issues relating to employment rights and health at work.

Although there are no concrete international regulations relating to port work and cargo handling, the traditional and historical understanding is that cargo handling is done by the dock workers. This tradition is also supported by some national laws and regulations. At an international level, there are two ILO conventions: ILO 152 Occupational Safety and Health (Dock Work) Convention – 1979; and ILO 137 Dock Work Convention – 1973.

Article 3.2 of the ILO 137 convention states that registered dock workers shall have priority of engagement for dock work. However, implementation of these conventions depends on ratification by nation states and, so far, ILO 152 and ILO 137 have been ratified by only 22 and 25

countries respectively. The ITF uniform collective agreement also includes a clause that ships' crews shall not be required or induced to carry out cargo handling.

However, we cannot judge the situation from the existing agreements or regulations. In reality, whenever possible port authorities may take decisions on the conditions of their workers i.e. use of non-union or casual labour etc. New port developments and private port terminals in particular, in a competitive environment, may opt to lower their labour conditions to make their ports more attractive for the shipping lines. In other words, more regulated ports could have less competitive advantages. This deregulation process has been described as ports of convenience. One of the impacts of this process is that seafarers are getting more involved in cargo handling.

One AB reported: "We have a very short trip and do all the lashing and unlashing. As far as I know, officers get a percentage and we get \$1 per unit. It was very hard in the first few months, but I've got used to it. Last month I got \$400 from cargo work. Lashing takes 6-8 hours because the vessel only carries 400 units. Lashing is not included in normal working hours. We still do maintenance work and keep watches."

As this account suggests, seafarers

generally receive an additional payment for cargo handling. The going rate in the industry is \$1 for lashing and \$0.50 for unlashing cargo and, after various cuts, an AB could earn as much as \$500 a month. This income is generally termed in the portage bill as an "additional earning". As the crew are paid separately for the cargo handling, the hours they work for cargo handling are not included in their working hours. In a sense they are sub-contracted to handle the cargo.

Despite long working hours and adverse consequences, the system provides some extra cash for the crew and there are seafarers happy to do this sort of work. However, there is an incentive for the officers to keep this cargo handling system and, of course, it is more profitable for the shipowner/operator, so there will always be pressure on the crew to perform this sort of task. This system also speeds up the port operation. For example, seafarers can start unlashing cargo before approaching the port. A senior manager of a shipping company who was interviewed recently stated that in his company seafarers handled the cargo, but the additional amount paid to seafarers was comparable to that paid to dock workers. However, he emphasised that the advantage of seafarers handling the cargo was that it speeded up port operations and seafarers were available to handle the cargo

whenever needed.

Not all companies operate in this way. It is more common aboard ro-ro and containerships involved in short-sea trade. Some ports do not permit cargo handling by seafarers (mainly ports in France), but it is very common all over Europe. Some ports bring in agency workers, however, and in many cases these are much cheaper than dock workers and seafarers. For example, in the UK, casual port labour generally only earns the minimum wage.

Container and ro-ro vessels in particular have very fast turnaround times and when seafarers handle cargo they have no opportunity for shore leave and this creates very serious welfare issues. Seafarers became more and more confined to their ships. A recent SIRC survey of seafarers in relation to their life and work balance revealed that the perception of shore leave has changed over the years. Being able to get to the nearest phone box to make a phone call was regarded as "shore leave" by the majority of the seafarers.

Seafarers are in a very vulnerable position and find it difficult to resist cargo handling even though they are not always paid for it, as this account from another AB demonstrates:

"We trade between X, Y and Z. X is our home port and we load 2,800 units. We do all the lashing and unlashing –

sometimes we work as long as 28 hours with just meal breaks. We don't get any additional money for lashing. I accept this. I've no choice. Our crew agent in Manila will not give us a ship [if I complain]. The manning agent takes our passports, seamen's books and training certificates. Without handing these in you cannot take your leave pay. They take them so that you cannot be transferred to another company without their knowledge. Despite these conditions many seafarers want to work for them."

Many seafarers also find this additional work detrimental to their long-term health. As a different AB put it: "I get about \$500 a month extra [for cargo work] but it is a back-breaking work. I'm sure all this money will go to doctors in the long run."

However, cargo handling by seafarers under pressure could have still more serious consequences as a port chaplain explains: "There has been a fatal injury here... Mistakes were made; short cuts were taken because there is great pressure



A SEAFARER gets ready for cargo discharge. (Photo: SIRC)

on seafarers. The fatality case was an accident waiting to happen. When the ship came back into the port a week after the incident I had to counsel the other AB who was working with the seafarer and watched him die. He said that the pressure is always on, that the deceased was taking risks with the consent of both of them because once they'd finished lashing the containers – and it was the penultimate container loading that killed him – they had to get the ship ready to go to sea. So, therefore, they're doing the lashing while the containers are being loaded. They are taking risks with their lives every time they are in port."

When the chaplain was asked why he thought that the seafarers were taking such risks his response was brief: "In order to keep up with the schedule, because otherwise they get penalised."

It needs to be acknowledged that new technology, deregulation, the introduction of casual labour, the emergence of new port terminals and new port developments and the competitive environment between port operators, are all presenting challenges to traditional dock workers. Self cargo handling by seafarers and casual workers is widely accepted by governments, shipping companies, port authorities and even by the seafarers themselves. Most of the time there are financial benefits for all the parties involved. However, research-based evidence suggests that for seafarers' welfare, health and safety at work, cargo handling still needs to be done by trained, experienced and registered port workers.