

International Trade  
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# At Port of Tacoma, unions step in to help foreign seafarers get paid

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The Port of Tacoma and Commencement Bay on Feb. 23, 2018, in Tacoma. This month, 15 seafarers on a grain-carrying ship that docked in the Port of Tacoma said they hadn't been paid for seven months. (Ted S. Warren / The Associated Press)

By **Renata Geraldo** 

*Seattle Times business reporter*

When grain-carrying ship ASL Uranus docked in the Port of Tacoma this month, 15 Burmese seafarers spoke up: They hadn't been paid in full for seven months, unlike their Chinese and Vietnamese co-workers. Unions stepped in to help and ensure the workers' safety.

Unpaid wages are the most common complaint from international seafarers, according to the International Transport Workers' Federation, a London-based international association of transport workers unions. In 2021, the organization secured \$37.6 million in unpaid wages.

One of the first people to talk with the Burmese workers was ITF's West Coast inspector Jeff Engels, who found out that the seafarers' employer, China-based Agricore Group, had withheld \$73,458 in unpaid wages. The workers also said the company demanded that, if paid, they would have to return the money to the ship's captain once they left U.S. waters. They feared for their lives and the safety of their families, who were also being threatened, the workers told Engels.

Agricore did not respond to inquiries.

The Liberian flag state — that country's ship registry — became involved in the situation by interviewing the seafarers and detaining the ship after issuing five violations of the Maritime Labour Convention related to unpaid wages. The U.S. has not ratified the MLC, so the Coast Guard has limited power on these issues, Engels said.

"There's no government agency in the world that's looking after [the workers]," said Jared Faker, president of International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 23. "So really just other workers have to look out for them."

ITF and the Liberian flag state negotiated an agreement with Agricore Group to ensure the payment of wages and guarantee the workers' safety after they departed the U.S.



The workers asked for the compensation in cash, and a shipping agent brought the amount to the vessel for the Burmese seafarers, Engels said.

Faker drafted letters to Washington's congressional delegation, the Coast Guard and law enforcement in case the seafarers needed to be escorted off the ship and flown directly home for safety. The ILWU would not have waited for "all the red tape to clear" to extract the seafarers if they decided to leave the ship, according to a news release. But the workers ultimately decided to return to China on the boat.

ILWU represents dockworkers on the West Coast as well as Hawaii, Alaska and British Columbia. In cases where there is mistreatment of nonmember workers, the union can still offer assistance, such as drafting letters to authorities or even stopping working on a vessel. Faker said dockworkers — such as tug workers, pilots, longshore line handlers — could have stopped if the Uranus tried to leave the port.

The Uranus is registered in Liberia, which is common practice for shipping companies because of lax labor laws and tax friendliness, ITF's Engels said. Almost half of the world's entire ship fleet is registered in Liberia, Panama and the Marshall Islands.

The seafarers had been hired by a third-party Myanmar-based staffing company. Two companies from that country, OMI Marine and Golden Bulk Marine, were messaging the seafarers with threats, Engels said. Neither company responded to inquiries.

Faker said he is cautiously optimistic that the agreement, enforced by the flag state, will be followed once the seafarers make it to China.

So far, Agricore has complied with the agreement regarding record keeping, correcting crew contacts and arranging to bypass crewing agencies to pay the crew directly, Engels said, adding that oversight has been successful since the ship left the Port of Tacoma on Feb. 11.

"I can track the vessel. It's only making 9 knots," Engels said last week. "I don't think they can send WhatsApp messages when they get too far out there."

Working conditions for seafarers can be scarce, and they can be intimidated to speak up even in unionized ports, Local 23 President Faker said.

"These seafarers have working conditions with very little oversight or regulations in their work environment," Faker said, so they "have extremely limited power."

Engels, who is months from retiring, said the seafarers' courage to speak up amid threats and the outcomes of this case made him hopeful for the future of the ports.

“As a grizzled, old cynical ITF inspector, I was inspired by the heart that the crew and the folks ashore displaying solidarity put forth,” he said. “It just was inspiring, [and] made me happy that I have this career.”

*This story is updated to clarify the employer had paid the workers but not in full, and remove ILWU and crewing agencies from the seventh paragraph as they were not part of the negotiations.*

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