

# Asia Pacific and the global maritime industry: Hierarchies, vulnerabilities, solidarities

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## Keywords

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## Introduction

In the last two decades, the Asia Pacific has become the global maritime industry's most important region (Patil, 2019). This pivot is demonstrated by the important role it plays in various sectors of the industry, from global seaborne commerce, ship ownership, shipbuilding and ship scrapping, to labor supply for both the merchant fleet and the fishing industry. The Asia-Pacific region also has some of the biggest fishing industries in the world. It is therefore simultaneously a site of maritime power (seaborne commerce, ship ownership and building, and size of fishing industry) and a place of exploitation (ship scrapping, fishing industry) and source of cheap and/or exploited workers.

As a site of power, the region accounted for 64.3 percent of global commerce in 2021, an increase from 47.9 percent in 2006, representing almost two-thirds of global seaborne commerce (7,054 metric tons (mt)). In contrast, Europe's trade

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share of global commerce dropped, from 27 percent (2,131 mt) in 2006 to 15.7 percent (1,722 mt) in 2021 ([Institute of the Americas, 2023](#)). The same is true for the Americas, whose share dropped from 20 percent in 2006 to 13.7 percent in 2021, despite only a slight drop in terms of weight, from 1,538 mt to 1,501 mt ([Institute of the Americas, 2023: 25](#)). In terms of ship ownership, in 2022, 10 Asian countries were in the top 20 countries or territories of ownership (national- and foreign-flagged ships), controlling 48.4 percent of the world merchant fleet's carrying capacity (measured in deadweight tonnage (dwt)): China, 13.4 percent; Japan, 11.4 percent; Singapore, 6.2 percent; Hong Kong SAR, China, 5.2 percent; South Korea, 4.3 percent; Taiwan, 2.6 percent; United Arab Emirates, 1.8 percent; Türkiye, 1.7 percent; India, 1.4 percent; and Indonesia, 1.3 percent. The three leading shipbuilding countries in 2023 were China, Korea and Japan, which accounted for 93 percent of all shipbuilding activities ([UNCTAD, 2023b: 29](#)). China alone accounted for 47 percent of the global total ([UNCTAD, 2023a](#)). The [World Population Review's \(2024\)](#) list of the countries with the biggest fishing industries shows that of the top 15, 11 are from the Asia Pacific: China (1), Indonesia (2), India (3), Vietnam (4), Russia (6), Bangladesh (8), Philippines (10), Japan (11), South Korea (13), Myanmar (14) and Thailand (15).<sup>1</sup> Although Taiwan does not appear in the list, it is a major player; in terms of the deployment of its fishing vessels in the high seas, it ranks second to China, with Japan, Korea and Spain completing the top five countries ([Asis, 2019: 7](#)). As a place of exploitation and source of precarious, vulnerable or exploited workers, Asian countries are responsible for more than 95 percent of global ship scrapping: Bangladesh, 37.2 percent; India, 32.3 percent; Pakistan, 16.9 percent; Türkiye, 6.3 percent; and China, 2.4 percent ([UNCTAD, 2023a: 37](#)). Of the top five labor-supply countries, four are from Asia: Philippines (1), Indonesia (3), China (4) and India (5) ([BIMCO, 2021](#)). Russia, which ranks second, geographically, could also be considered part of Asia. The Philippines alone provides almost 30 percent of all seafarers ([Institute of the Americas, 2023](#)). China, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand are also major employers of Asia-Pacific workers, especially from Southeast Asia ([Urbina, 2019](#)). Unfortunately, the fishing sector is notorious for the abuse, exploitation and human trafficking of especially Southeast Asian migrant fishermen ([Couper et al., 2015; Urbina, 2019](#)).

It is clear that the Asia-Pacific region and the global maritime industry are essential to the other's prosperity. This Special Issue on the global maritime industry focuses on the conditions and challenges that workers from and within the region are facing, highlighting the hierarchies, vulnerabilities and the possibilities for solidarity and collective agency that characterize maritime labor. Distinctly, this Special Issue examines how these conditions

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<sup>1</sup>Taiwan is not included in the list, perhaps, because it is not recognized as a nation-state of its own.

were exacerbated, or possibilities were enabled, by the COVID-19 pandemic. We situate these developments in labor conditions within the broader literature on globalization and migration and how their combination has facilitated the making of structures of vulnerability and hierarchy for maritime workers.

## **Globalization, labor migration and precarious work arrangements**

Maritime scholars have examined how globalization has shaped and has been shaped by the modern maritime industry (Campling and Colás, 2021; DeSombre, 2006), and how neoliberalism has structured employment and labor practices in the industry (Knott, 2017; Lu, 2011). In particular, the maritime industry has implemented widespread contractualization (Chen and Tang, 2021; Pia, 2016). The practice of hiring temporary staff has seen a global expansion across business sectors in the past decades (Bohle et al., 2011; Carter, 2022; Coe et al., 2007; Vosko, 2000) and has led to increased precarity and the diminution of workers' rights and protection (McKay et al., 2012; Strauss and Fudge, 2013). This insecure and contingent labor has become prevalent, if not the norm, especially among labor migrants (Kalleberg, 2011, 2009). The segmented workforce, according to nationality, that shipping companies utilize to drive down labor costs has led to competition among labor-supply nations from the developing world in which protecting (or increasing) their profitable labor market share trumps seafarers' labor protection (Couper et al., 1999; Galam, 2022; Walters and Bailey, 2013). It is within this profit-oriented institutionalization of contingent labor arrangements and state-sanctioned and facilitated exploitation of migrant workers that a "footloose" globalization has profoundly shaped seafarers' insecure conditions (Alderton and Winchester, 2002; Sletmo, 1989). A highly mobile, hierarchical, multicultural and mostly-isolated workplace arrangement (as workers are in an enclosed environment on open seas) under contractual employment conditions quite distinct to the seafaring experience (Acejo, 2012; Sampson and Schroeder, 2006) has led to work insecurities in which seafarers, especially those in merchant and cruise fleets, acquiesce to a system of authority and control to retain their job and strengthen their chances of being rehired (Sampson and Bloor, 2007). The precarious employment that underlies seafaring permeates their lived experiences, generating an array of risks, strains and tensions (Abila and Acejo, 2021; Sampson and Acejo, 2023; Sampson and Ellis, 2021). The remainder of this introduction probes the above developments. Distinctly, we contribute to the recent and growing literature and much-needed intervention that makes explicit the racialization of labor regimes in the maritime industry (see, Clark, 2022; Khalili, 2020; McKay, 2021). We begin with an account of the globalization of the maritime industry which

contextualizes the section on maritime labor hierarchies and vulnerabilities that follows it.

## **The flag of convenience system and the global labor market for seafarers**

The negative conditions within which maritime workers are laboring today fundamentally stem from the structural changes that transformed the maritime industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century. These changes include: The expansion of corporate ownership of ships and concentration of capital formations instantiated by the proliferation of ship management companies and global logistics firms (Lillie, 2006); the containerization of the liner trades; the evolution of ships specializing in the transport of specific types of commodities; the displacement of national regulatory systems by transnational and international ones; the growth in the critical importance of environmental issues in shaping the regulatory mechanisms and frameworks of the maritime industry; and the restructuring of the locations of the core cities of the industry into global circuits of regional metropolitan hubs in Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific (ILO, 2004: 1). However, the changes that have had the most significant consequences to maritime labor, which constitute the globalization of the maritime industry, are the shift to the Flag of Convenience (FOC) system, also known as “open registries,” and the development of a single global labor market for seafarers (ILO, 2004; Lillie, 2006).

Up until the 1970s, embedded maritime nations, such as the United Kingdom (UK), Denmark, Sweden and Norway, considered their ships and their crew as an extension of the nation-state (Alderton and Winchester, 2002; Stopford, 2008). They were called “embedded” because their large merchant fleets were registered under their own flags and employed their own citizens, which meant that “both trade income and employment in the trade were linked to the same national economy” (Dua, 2019: 499). The economic fallout of the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 depressed ocean freight rates and created fierce competition within a world of merchant fleets that was overtonnaged—that is, it had too many ships (Couper, 2009: 186). Shipowners cut their operating and labor costs by registering their vessels with FOC. Flagging out enabled shipowners to circumvent the regulatory frameworks, as well as the labor and maritime laws of embedded maritime nations, while enjoying beneficial tax regimes (Alderton and Winchester, 2002; Couper et al., 1999; ILO, 2004; UNCTAD, 2023b). At the same time, many developing countries, including the Pacific Islands, “hir[ed] out their sovereignty as FOCs” to earn some revenue through ship registration fees (Couper, 2009: 186). Although the system of flagging out has a longer history, the practice intensified in the 1970s. Whereas in 1950, only six percent of tonnage was flagged with the two major open registers, namely Liberia and Panama, by 1975 this figure increased to

27 percent. Between 1990 and 2001, the number of vessels registered with all FOCs went up by 70 percent (ILO, 2004: 28-29). In 2022, 70 percent of the global ship capacity flew under a foreign flag (UNCTAD, 2023b: 32). Of this, the Pacific nation Marshall Islands, the world's third biggest flag of registration, accounted for 13.2 percent of total world tonnage, for an aggregate of 299,170 tons (UNCTAD, 2023b: 33). Although outdated, figures for 2006 provide an indication of the size of the registries of Pacific nations or territories: Marshall Islands, 953 ships equivalent to almost 33 million gross tons (GT); Vanuatu, 419 ships for an aggregate of 2 million GT; Tonga, potentially almost 0.5 million GT (no number of ships available); and Tuvalu, 60 vessels (no estimate of equivalent tonnage) (Couper, 2009: 186-187).

Flagging out also enabled shipowners to hire an international crew, resulting in "the opening up of the labor market, and the construction of a global infrastructure for supplying seafarers to the FOC shipowners around the world" (Lillie, 2006: 31). The outsourcing of seafaring labor accidentally led to the creation of what is now claimed as a single, global labor market for seafarers (ILO, 2004: 66), a market where there are "no nationality restrictions, so that a seafarer of any nationality may be recruited" and where recruitment is "highly organized through extensive global networks linking shipowners, ship managers, crew managers, labor-supply agencies and training institutions" (ILO, 2001: 33). The 1970s marked the sourcing of workers for the maritime industry's merchant fleet from the Global South. By the late 1980s, the Philippines had established itself as a major source of seafarers, which is attributed to the country's policy of exporting labor (ILO, 2004). Later on, the opening of the Eastern bloc led Russia and other post-communist countries to challenge the dominance of the labor market by the Philippines and India. Other countries such as China and Ukraine would later compete for the seafaring labor market (Lillie, 2006: 31-32). As pointed out earlier, of the top five suppliers of seafarers, or "crews of convenience," whether officers or ratings, four are from Asia (BIMCO and ICS, 2021). Although the Pacific Islands supplied only about 7,300 officers and ratings (2005 figures), this number made significant economic contributions to many small islands (Couper, 2009: 186).

## Racialized hierarchies and vulnerabilities in maritime labor

An extensive economic globalization marked by the global rise of contractual work (DeSombre, 2006) attended the shift in crewing patterns. Diversity of seafarers according to nationality (or multinational crewing) became a key feature of the composition of shipboard labor. The FOC system created a racialized hierarchy in which crews from the global South were paid much lower wages than seafarers from embedded maritime states (Alderton and Winchester, 2002; ILO, 2004) and were more likely to work in lower-ranking positions (Clark, 2022). In the cruise sector, nationality became the most

important determining factor for wage levels where, for example, waitresses from France, Germany and the UK were paid more than twice the wages paid to waitresses from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia (ILO, 2004: 113). This pattern has been observed in top market cruise ships operating worldwide and in the Asia-Pacific region (ILO, 2004), and it is possible that the practice is more widespread. Khalili (2020: 227) has called this “a dual-wage system” whereby “officers of European extraction get paid one rate and worked on more amenable contracts and the ship’s crews on another wage scale and worked on a more draconian contract.” This hierarchy based on race (or nationality) and rank has structured life aboard a ship. Spaces on board are highly segmented according to rank, and who occupies certain ranks is racially inflected. Officers and ratings have different facilities for use: From mess halls and lounges to laundry rooms. When there is a joint mess hall for the entire crew, differences in rank are marked by separating the table of senior officers from that of junior officers and ratings. The spatial practices that seafarers perform in their designated spaces further contribute to the maintenance of hierarchy. In the context of the multinational crew composition of modern ships, it is inevitable that “in and through the ship’s spatial organization, [...] seafarers perform racialized forms of difference and belonging that heighten social boundaries, often hardening them through the essentializing of cultural distinctiveness” (McKay, 2021: 698).

The outsourcing of labor supply has also engendered negative consequences on the terms and conditions of seafarers’ employment and distanced them further from employers, which has facilitated the neglect of their welfare and health and safety (Sampson, 2013: 45). The issue of seafarers’ vulnerability has thus become prominent. Apart from being a dangerous job and along with technological developments, seafaring has witnessed a reduction in the number of crew members onboard, work intensification, longer working hours and increased levels of fatigue. Due to the fragmented scope of welfare provision and administration, monitoring seafarers’ health and well-being in the workplace has become increasingly difficult to undertake. As more shipping companies gain leverage through a contingent workforce, seafarers’ capacity to bargain for fair working conditions is curtailed. Across Asia where institutionalized contractual labor is entangled with weak labor governance, temporarily hired workers are caught up in a “protracted precarity,” that is, a transnational nature of labor-supply arrangement, mainly premised on economic returns and restricted rights has curtailed worker autonomy (Piper and Withers, 2018). The structural impediment brought about by flagging out has compromised seafarers’ agency as they become disposable, cheap labor whose rights to fair representation and social protection are weakly supported both nationally and globally. Unsurprisingly, seafaring labor conditions have been described as resistant to change (Walters and Bailey, 2013) in the same way that the multifaceted responses to vulnerabilities, as found in the Maritime Labor



Convention (MLC) 2006, are subject to varying jurisdictions and therefore prone to ambiguities.

In the fishing sector, the FOC system has helped hide a globalized fishing fleet responsible for most of the IUU—illegal, unreported and unregulated—fishing that is happening on the high seas (Gianni and Simpson, 2005). It is estimated that seven to 15 percent of the global total number of vessels flagged under open registries are involved in fisheries (EJF, 2009). The system has aided and abetted the abuse, exploitation and trafficking of migrant fishermen (Couper et al., 2015; Urbina, 2019), making those working onboard fishing vessels and in seafood processing plants some of the most exploited and vulnerable workers in the world (Bonlokke et al., 2019; Couper et al., 2015; Soulina and Yovani, 2020; Yea, 2014). As in the merchant fleet, racialization is part of the capitalist mechanism of extracting and accumulating value from migrant labor. For example, workers from West and East Africa hired on European-owned vessels are paid much lower wages (Campling and Colás, 2021). APIL and IMO's (2016) study of the employment of migrant fishermen in the South Korean fishing industry revealed that the most serious human trafficking and forced labor conditions were committed in distant water fishing where 70 percent of the workforce are migrants from the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia (APIL and IMO, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Taiwan's fishing industry has facilitated the importation of cheap migrant labor especially from the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia by implementing easier entry requirements and lower recruitment fees. Taiwan's policies and employment practices subject migrant fishers to different laws and regulations, leading to the racialization of foreign fishermen (Parhusip, 2018). In Thailand's fishing and seafood sector, rural migrants from neighboring Southeast Asian countries are discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity and language (Chantavich et al., 2016; Issara Institute, 2017, as cited in Clark, 2022). These deliberate migration and labor policies show how "global maritime capital operates in an almost post-national context" (Clark, 2022: 659) drawing foreign or migrant workers from rural and impoverished communities, enabling what Campling and Colás (2021: 114) have called "new ways of recruiting and disciplining an international workforce," which are amply demonstrated by the Thai fisheries and seafood industry.

Thailand's fishing fleet as of June 2023 totaled 58,670 vessels, of which 83 percent was artisanal and 16.87 percent was commercial (Statista, 2024). In 2022, the Thai fisheries and seafood industry ranked sixth in the world for seafood product exports and was predicted to contribute to the 2023 domestic economy a sector revenue of USD 8.04 billion (274 billion Thai Baht (THB))

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<sup>2</sup>Distant water fishing (DWF) refers to fishing operations conducted in international seas or areas outside a country's 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Coastal water fishing (CWF), on the other hand, is conducted in a country's internal waters, territorial sea and EEZ.

(EJF, 2023: 3). In 2020, about 300,000 workers were employed in the Thai seafood industry, two-thirds of whom were migrant workers from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos (ILO, 2020). Of the 70,000 fishers working on Thai commercial fishing vessels over 30 GT, 94 percent were migrant workers (EJF, 2023). For a decade now, Thailand's fishing industry has been subjected to international scrutiny "due to human rights concerns in the sector. Thai fishing vessels were notorious for being the scenes of appalling crimes including slavery, brutal physical abuse, human trafficking, and even murder of vulnerable migrant workers. [...] [U]nscrupulous vessel owners have preyed on vulnerable migrant workers from neighboring countries, often threatening them with violence, debt bondage, and threats against their families whilst forcing them to work, commonly in atrocious living and working conditions" (EJF, 2023: 8).

Urbina (2019) has further noted that Thailand's fishing and seafood sectors' dependence on migrant labor, and the persistence of labor and human rights abuses, especially debt bondage, are attributable to global economic and historical forces. Firstly, recruiting young Thai men from villages in the northeast region to work in fishing boats increasingly became difficult as the sector gained a reputation for being extremely dangerous. This was caused by the destruction and sinking of hundreds of fishing vessels and the death of over 800 men by Typhoon Gay in 1989 (Urbina, 2019). Secondly, the expansion of Thailand's economy, registering annual average GDP growth rates of nine percent and peaking at 13 percent in 1988, led to the growth of the country's middle class. The rise of wages in land-based employment and the very low unemployment rate (less than one percent in 2016) made working at sea less attractive even more (Urbina, 2019). Third, as Thailand's fishing fleet grew, its fish stock plummeted. Globally, by the early 2000s, Thai waters were one of the most overfished. Nevertheless, more fish were being caught because Thai vessels were fishing in more distant waters. These economic and environmental forces made Thailand reliant on migrant workers and on coercive ways of keeping them (Urbina, 2019: 241-242).

## **Challenges to solidarity and collective agency**

The globalization and deregulation of the maritime industry, manifested in the shift to the FOC system and the development of a global labor market for seafarers, not only restructured the industry in terms of its organization and regulation (Gekara et al., 2013) but also had significant consequences on unions (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Lillie, 2006; Walters and Bailey, 2013). These weakened trade unions in the sector, reducing their influence in negotiating for the workers' pay and working conditions (Walters and Bailey, 2013: 6), and undermined their capacity to organize and represent seafarers working in the international fleet (Gekara et al., 2013). This



occurred at the same time as the respect for workers' rights diminished (Lillie, 2006).

Although it has been noted that "labor laws and union structures in new labor[-]supply countries were not strong enough to challenge powerful multinational employers, often operating with the blessing of neoliberal governments" (Gekara et al., 2013: 170), the contractualization of work within the industry—which became a defining feature of international seafaring labor—also made trade union activity and collective bargaining more complex and challenging. First, organizing contractual seafarers has become difficult because their eligibility for membership is contingent on their employment (ILO, 2004). Thus, their membership to the union would be co-terminus with their employment contract. Second, seafarers are hired by crewing agencies, and as such, the employment contract is made between the seafarer and the crewing agency, rather than with the shipowner. The presence of a mediating entity weakens seafarer and union ties (ILO, 2004: 91-92).

Within the segmented global shipping labor, "cheaper" crew members from the Asia Pacific have less union capacity compared to established maritime countries in Europe (ILO, 2004). Union representation for seafarers is thus complex, owing to the global character of labor and multinational workplaces where various national labor regimes apply. As improving crew conditions and labor standards are mandated through the flag-states' trade unions while enforcement becomes the responsibility of individual states (Gekara et al., 2013), effective worker representation becomes challenged. Promotion of the seafarers' interests is constrained by this transnational tension, such that union representation is weakened by state-embedded attitudes and expectations, and is therefore restricted in their capacity to adapt to the modern flagging out paradigm (Gekara et al., 2013).

Union activity for migrant workers in the fishing industry is limited and restricted "given the obstacles of forming an organization by and for migrants" (Asis, 2019: 25). In Taiwan, the Yilan Migrant Fishermen Union was established in 2013 but the "process of union formation encountered difficulties—investing a lot of time in workers' education because the laws are in Chinese; countering the pressure put by vessel owners and agents on government offices to block the establishment of the union; and the difficulty of meeting the required documents (e.g., Alien Registration Card, passport) because these are kept by the employer or broker" (Asis, 2019: 25). In Thailand, despite the fact that most of the workers in the fisheries and seafood processing sector are migrants, they do not have the same rights as Thai domestic workers (EJF, 2023: 13). Currently, they are prohibited from any form of worker organization. Various international organizations and institutions have called on the Thai government to ratify two International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions (C87- *Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise* and C98- *Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining*) in order to effectively address forced labor, human

trafficking and slavery in the fisheries sector (EJF, 2023). These two Conventions would eliminate their structural disenfranchisement by giving them freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, hence providing them with the means to challenge and resist labor exploitation (EJF, 2023: 13).

## **Maritime workers and the COVID-19 pandemic**

The already difficult conditions workers face in the maritime industry were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. National lockdowns that followed the World Health Organization's declaration on 11 March 2020 of COVID-19 as a global pandemic resulted in a crew change crisis, which the International Maritime Organization (IMO) labeled a humanitarian crisis (IMO, 2020a). The concomitant border closures and restrictions to mobility, including the global shutdown of the aviation industry and the failure of governments to designate seafarers as essential workers, made moving seafarers around the world harder and costlier (Bockmann, 2020). The crisis was seen to involve the "systematic breaching of labour contracts," leading to "forced labour at sea" (De Beukelaer, 2021: 1). At the height of the crew change crisis, an estimated 400,000 seafarers (IMO, 2020b), whose contracts had already ended for several months, could not go home to their countries. This meant that another 400,000 seafarers were unable to join their ships, leaving them unemployed. The complex crew change workarounds due to quarantine and mandatory health measures resulted in delayed repatriation, prolonging and exacerbating their confinement and isolation, which led to fatigue, and physical and mental health issues (IMO, 2020a). Seafarers therefore remained trapped onboard with reduced access to health care and welfare support. Those unable to join their ships faced financial difficulties, suffering from heightened stress due to being unable to provide for their families. Most of these seafarers were from Asia where there was little to no financial help from their governments.

In the fisheries sector, the economic, social and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic affected most severely the most vulnerable groups, including migrant fishers, fish workers, crew members, and women involved in harvesting, processing and selling (FAO, n.d.). Migrant fishers and workers, many of them unregistered or undocumented, were excluded from social protection and relief packages, which exacerbated the pandemic's secondary effects such as poverty and hunger (FAO, n.d.). The lockdowns that were imposed caused employment disruptions and prevented workers from returning home (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2022). Compared with seafarers in the merchant and cruise sectors, those working in commercial and industrial fishing experienced more challenging conditions not only because their work is more difficult but also because they often do not have the same legal protections and rights due to their exclusion from the MLC 2006 (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2022).

## The special issue articles

Our discussion above of developments in the global maritime industry and their consequences for labor and the condition of workers highlighted increased contingency or flexibility, weakened unions, racialization and lowered labor standards (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008: 15-22).<sup>3</sup> The six Special Issue articles provide clear accounts of how these conditions are experienced in the present and elucidate the intersecting factors that are producing these conditions: Four articles focus on vulnerability (see, Shan et al.; Lee et al.; Borovnik; Abila and Malecosio), three on hierarchies (see, Lee et al.; Borovnik; Turgo) and two on issues of solidarity and collective agency (see, Tang; Turgo). Furthermore, five articles are related to the COVID-19 pandemic: Three articles highlight how the condition of maritime workers was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see, Lee et al.; Shan et al.; Abila and Malecosio); one is on how the risks and precarity they are now facing emerged as a result of the pandemic (Borovnik); and lastly, one focused on how a sense of solidarity was facilitated by the difficulties experienced by Chinese seafarers as a result of the pandemic (Tang).

Lijun Tang adopted a social network perspective to investigate how Chinese seafarers expand and deepen online social relations. He examined the generative capacity of the internet and social media for solidarity and collective agency in China, and how such solidarity can be harnessed to advance Chinese seafarers' labor rights. Internet use is thus not only a welfare issue but also a labor or industrial relations one. The two cases that Tang analyzed are instructive in that they occur in the context of a strong state wary of collective agency outside of its purview and which may threaten the social order and so polices and controls online activity and expression. Finally, the development of solidarity is situated in a context where the seafarers' union does not really represent the seafarers' interests and, indeed, is even expected to be an apparatus of the state.

Desai Shan, Pengfei Zhang, Sriram Rajagopal and Hugo Rojas provided a socio-legal analysis of how the combination of the pandemic, the related public health measures and the precarious nature of employment in the maritime industry increased the vulnerability of seafarers. Drawing on interviews with seafarers from China, the Philippines and Canada, policy review, and media coverage analysis, they highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed seafarers to further exploitation, already heightened by their precarious employment, which has led to the erosion of their occupational health and safety (OHS) rights, and revealed the structures and mechanisms of seafarer

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<sup>3</sup>This is Bonacich and Wilson's (2008: 15-22) account of the changes for labor brought about by the logistics revolution (of which shipping is a crucial component) but which could very well apply to the maritime industry.

exploitation. Their article shed light on the business practices that exacerbate the suffering of seafarers for the sake of profit and the regulatory failures to enforce international maritime OHS laws and regulations resulting in the violation or disregard of seafarers' labor rights.

Sanley Salvacion Abila and Serafin Malecosio Jr. examined the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) provisions for Filipino seafarers working in the international fleet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on survey questionnaire data, they noted that Filipino seafarers found the mental health support provided by their companies and families useful and important, which include positive and collegial work environment; communicating with the family; colleague counseling and support; physical exercise onboard; updates on COVID-19; group recreational activities; timely crew change; and prioritizing seafarers for vaccination. They recommended adopting culturally sensitive policies, which currently are lacking, to better provide for the mental health and overall well-being needs of Filipino seafarers, especially in times of crisis. This call is made in the context of inadequate provision in countries where most of the seafarers come from.

Maria Borovnik examined the crew change crisis as a human rights issue and framed it within uneven geographies of development that shaped the (im)mobilities of seafarers. This broader discussion serves as the ground for an examination of the case of I-Kiribati seafarers who, because of the strict COVID-19 containment policy adopted by Kiribati, led to seafarers being stuck both abroad and at home. Borovnik presents the dilemma faced by the government of Kiribati—protect the general population by completely keeping the virus out ([Marschke and Vandergeest, 2022](#)) or repatriate its stranded seafarers. Its choice of the former led to the termination in 2021 of the agreement between Kiribati and South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS), a consortium of German shipping companies that provided much-needed employment for I-Kiribati seafarers and hence remittances for Kiribati.

Johanna Lee, Kimberly Rogovin and Sudarat Musikawong examined the restrictions and marginalization migrant workers faced, detailing Thailand's immigration policies and containment measures imposed on migrant workers. Rooted in the structural discrimination of migrant workers, the policies excluded them from social protection and financial assistance, while the pandemic restrictions caused a weakening of labor inspections. This combination increased the suffering of migrant workers and heightened their vulnerability to exploitation and forced labor. Migrant workers were made to work harder and for longer hours as the demand for workers could not be met because of border closures. However, migrant fishers unable to work due to their confinement to their quarters received no salary, exacerbating their financial difficulties. Seafood processing workers also lived in squalid conditions in ghetto dormitories.

Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken on four voyages on board cargo vessels, Nelson Turgo reflected on how spaces and spatial practices help develop a sense of place among seafarers and enforce shipboard hierarchy to attain a safety culture at sea. He noted that rank is the most salient factor in how spaces are managed, and lived or worked in by seafarers. That said, race also plays an important role. Filipino officers would oftentimes violate the hierarchy of spaces and its attendant spatial practices by spending extended time in ratings' spaces (mess halls, lounge), highlighting how spaces are also racialized and how spatial segregations continuously evoke the racialized divide and differences between seafarers. Nonetheless, while spatial practices maintain hierarchy, these also enable seafarers to explore the consequences of the use of space, providing possibilities for collective agency among those socialized to follow rules.

## **Conclusion and future research directions**

The Special Issue highlights the vulnerabilities, hierarchies and challenges to, as well as opportunities for, solidarity and collective agency experienced by maritime workers. The Special Issue articles point to persistent issues affecting maritime labor. These include the tension between the interests of shipowners and maritime workers, the role of states in this tension (and relatedly, the role of organizations such as regulatory bodies in creating a better environment for maritime workers), and the continuing importance of solidarity and collective agency in the context of the widespread diminishment of maritime workers' capacity to organize. Having related the featured articles to existing scholarship and situated their themes within conceptual and analytical frameworks, we identify in this conclusion some directions for future research.

Maritime workers' vulnerable position, produced by the globalization and deregulation of the maritime industry, has further intensified within labor migration through which their participation in maritime labor occurs. The global maritime industry is complex and adding to its complexity are the various sectors it covers: Merchant, fishing and cruise (which is not represented in this Special Issue). While the general trends of vulnerability and exploitation we discussed in this introduction apply to the three sectors, there are differences in these sectors such as in the level or intensity of exploitation and in their inclusion in international conventions. For example, seafarers in the fishing fleet, as earlier noted, are not (yet) covered by the MLC 2006, considered as the bill of rights of seafarers. It is, therefore, important for further research to identify and examine these differences and develop comparative studies with respect to the structures and conditions of vulnerability and exploitation of maritime workers. Part of this research agenda is an examination of how these structures continue to be shaped by race.

Various maritime stakeholders such as shipowners, seafood processing capitalists, flag states, labor-supply states, labor brokers and other actors have

different interests to protect. Labor-supply states, in need of employment opportunities for their citizens, as well as dependent on remittances, cooperate with and acquiesce to actors associated with capital (Galam, 2022; Pia, 2016). The alliances forged between state actors and international maritime players point towards complexities and difficulties in enacting and implementing laws and regulations on workers' rights. Overlapping jurisdictions and conflicting interests further the avenues for the exploitation of workers. This configuration of power asymmetries helps to ensure that capital prevails over maritime workers' welfare, which has become secondary and diminished.

This Special Issue therefore points to the necessity of effective regulation by states and international institutions particularly of the worst excesses of the global maritime industry which are not only committed by the worst flags, also known as "dark fleet," but also by states. Being highly globalized, the maritime industry has a polycentric governance structure, which Black (2008: 138) defines as that "in which the state is not the sole locus of authority, or indeed in which it plays no role at all [and one] marked by fragmentation, complexity and interdependence between actors, in which state actors are both regulators and regulated, and their boundaries are marked by the issues or problems they are concerned with, rather than necessarily by a common solution." Bloor et al. (2014: 458) have noted that this polycentricity makes governance multilevel and overlapping in character. This reality makes regulation complex and difficult, especially in the context in which actors associated with private capital have effectively gained the upper hand (Galam, 2022). This means that actors, such as states and national unions, that are supposed to keep the power and influence of actors associated with capital in check acquiesce instead to the latter. That said, examples of how effective regulation can significantly improve the condition of workers in the fishing or seafood industry could be cited. Due to the intervention of various state or supranational powers, the Taiwanese and Thai fishing industries have implemented measures to address issues of forced labor and slavery-like conditions (EJF, 2023). It is also necessary to examine how big corporate actors circumvent regulation and the law (see, Human Rights Watch, 2023) in order to develop better mechanisms for regulation.

Although we noted in this introduction how workers' capacity to organize has been severely diminished, this special issue nevertheless highlights the possibilities that exist in building solidarity. Despite state opposition as in the case of Taiwan (Asis, 2019) or state control as in the case of China (Tang, 2023), there are instances when workers and citizens have defied these restrictions. The success of union or worker organizing in Taiwan (Asis, 2019) and Thailand and Indonesia (Ford et al., 2024) in the fishing or seafood sector shows how the power of capital and of the state can be overcome. Future research could therefore look into how, in the context of a hostile environment for its existence especially in the fishing or seafood sector, worker solidarity has emerged, under what conditions did this occur and which actors are involved.



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