HIGH SEAS, LOW PAY
Working on Cruise Ships
By Ross A. Klein

“Look at this picture of my daughter,” says the woman working at the purser's desk on board the Statendam, a Holland America Line cruise ship. “She is one year old today. I haven't seen her for six months, and won't see her again for another six months.” She's crying. From the Phillipines, the woman tells me her one glimmer of hope is that, by doing this work, she's able to support her mother and her daughter. She hopes she'll be able to save enough to give her daughter opportunities that she never had.

Unlike this worker, for most of us, cruise ships maintain a degree of glamour and opulence. Advertising projects images of fun and carefree times. Those of us living in port cities see impressively clean, bright and huge ships glide into our harbours, offloading passengers anxious to spend money at stores, restaurants, and with tour operators. The reality for many cruise-ship workers, however, is certainly not carefree, nor fun. While the working conditions for officers, cruise staff, and those working in the shops and casinos are adequate, if not good, the experience of those working in the dining room, cleaning rooms, in the galley, and below deck is quite different. These workers are often paid substandard wages, have marginal accommodations, survive on inadequate food, and live under a system that is rife with abuse and uncertainty.

The precarious position of cruise-ship workers was made apparent in 2000, when Premier Cruises went bankrupt and left hundreds of workers stranded in Halifax. They had to go to court to fight for their money that was on deposit with the cruise line (back pay and gratuities to be sent to family back home). The Canadian courts ordered they be paid more than US$745,000 in back pay, and, with the help of the International Transport Workers' Federation, they were able to return to their home.

The Premier Cruises workers who were in Barcelona were not as lucky. Twenty-eight women and 232 men were stranded for 10 weeks on the Seawind Crown, with no income and no means to leave. After eight weeks, the ship had virtually run out of fuel, water and provisions. It was running on one emergency generator, which supplied only minimal power and lighting. According to the ITF's European cruise-ship coordinator, Ruud Touwen, crew members were “stripping equipment, radios, and TVs and taking it to the town to sell.” Their only subsistence was provided by the Port of Barcelona, charities, and other ships. The workers were finally repatriated by the ITF, though their back wages were lost.

The cruise industry experienced massive growth in the past two decades. Since 1980, occupancy increased almost 600 per cent, from 1.5 million to over 10 million passengers worldwide. As the industry has grown, it has also consolidated. Some companies have gone bankrupt. In 2000, three companies, reflecting four brand names, ceased operations. In 2001, another three companies reflecting six brand names went under. At the same time, the largest companies – Carnival Corporation, Royal Caribbean Cruises Limited, Star Cruises, and P&O Princess – have expanded and diversified through the purchase of other cruise lines. These four companies control almost
90 per cent of all berths on cruise ships. Carnival Corporation, which owns six brands, is the largest. It controls one-third of all berths. It had net profits of $1 billion each in the past two years, with gross revenues of approximately $3.5 billion.

The industry's growth has brought a need for more workers. Royal Caribbean International is owned by Royal Caribbean Cruises Limited. It operates 14 ships and has more than 30,000 berths (about 15 per cent of the North American cruise fleet). RCI estimates that it will need 12,000 new “hotel” employees for housekeeping and the dining room each year for the next five years to keep pace with expansion, and its need to replace staff who leave.

The majority of new workers will be drawn from under-industrialized countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and Central America. They are seduced by the idea of getting paid to travel the world on some of the most modern and beautiful ships. However, the image is not the reality. As the ITF reports, “below decks on virtually all cruise ships, there is a hidden world of long hours, low pay, insecurity and exploitation. Those who work continuously below deck, like in the galleys [ships kitchens], rarely see the light of day, let alone the shimmering sea of the Caribbean.”

Most of the workers in the lowest-paid positions secure their jobs through a recruiting agent. Paul Chapman, an American chaplain associated with seafarer's missions, says seafarers often view the agent – not the captain or ship owner – as their employer. In his study of international seafarers, he says: “The agent becomes the seafarers' patron, someone to whom they remain loyal, despite abuses. The others in authority are strangers; seafarers often do not know the ship owner, and the officers who give day-to-day orders are often from another country and speak another language. It is the agent with whom the seafarers negotiate the terms of their contract, [and] in whose office employment agreements are signed.” It is also the agent who forwards money to workers' families.

Using an agent increases the cost of securing employment on a cruise ship. The Wall Street Journal reported on one newly hired employee who had to pay a Croatian cruise-ship agent $600 to confirm his hiring. Carnival Cruise Line loaned him $1,400 for his ticket to the U.S. and the employee, suddenly in debt, “became, effectively, an indentured cruise-line employee, obligated to work for months to pay off his loan.” The Miami New Times described a cook on Carnival's Paradise who gave a Bombay agency $2,000, which included airfare. That sum was almost a third of the $7,000 he would make during his 10-month contract.

Jim Given is ITF's North American cruise-ship campaign director. He told me of an agency in Bucharest, Romania that charges prospective applicants US$500 simply for an interview, and an additional $1,000 to confirm their employment if they are hired. A Canadian company named Sea Cruise Enterprises was recently reported by Lloyd's List, a British-based international maritime newspaper, to be charging prospective shipboard employees US$57 simply to receive and transmit their resume to potential employers.

Under International Labour Organization regulations, these fees are to paid by the cruise line. However, that is not always the case. The scenarios above are common. Employees often accrue an enormous debt in order to get a job. In 1998, one such worker, a woman from Turkey who
inadvertently learned she was going to be fired, jumped overboard as Holland America Line's Westerdam approached Vancouver's harbour.

Workers on cruise ships have contracts that run as long as 12 months. Most work 10 months, followed by a two-month vacation. They then return for another 10 months. This means long separations from family and friends. An Indonesian waiter on Holland America Line's Statendam told me he hadn't been home for the birth of any of his four children. Another worker said, “The first month after returning home, I sleep. The next month, I live with the knowledge that I will shortly be back on the ship.” The pattern is the same, whether a worker is from Jamaica, Haiti, Indonesia, the Philippines, Turkey or Hungary.

Employees commonly work 10 to 13 hours a day, seven days a week. A shipboard waiter may work as many as 16 hours a day, and often gets less than six hours of uninterrupted rest per night, well below international standards. It is common to find collective agreements on cruise ships that require all shipboard employees to work 80 hours per week. In a survey of shipboard employees conducted by the ITF in 2001, 95 per cent reported working seven days a week.

In addition to long hours, remuneration is low, by North American standards. According to the ITF, wages for salaried workers who receive no tips “can be as low as US$400 a month, rising to US$700 a month for skilled cooks and security guards.” Those who receive tips have salaries that are even lower. Holland America Line, which employs primarily Filipinos and Indonesians in its hotel department, pays US$300 a month. This salary is higher than the industry norm, given the line's policy of “tipping not required.” On ships where tipping is expected, waiters, busboys and room stewards can earn salaries as low as US$50 a month. In any case, almost two-thirds of those receiving tips earn monthly incomes of $1,000 or more. And then there are fees that some workers are forced to pay.

Celebrity Cruises deducts $7 a week from waiters' and busboys' salaries for breakage, for instance, whether or not they break anything. “If I break something I am punished by having to go to the storeroom in the lower decks to get replacements,” an Indian waiter on Celebrity Cruises' Meridian told me. “Even if I am in the middle of serving, I must run down and get the supplies, which means my service may suffer and my tips will be lower.”

Carnival Cruise Line requires workers who interact with passengers to pay a $50 deposit for their uniforms. According to the ITF, some companies charge employees a “security bond” of up to US$750, supposedly to stop desertion, or to cover the consequent U.S. immigration-service fine a company gets charged. The bond can extend the amount of work time a worker spends just covering expenses to six out of the eight or 10 months on board.

Cruise lines have typically restricted the ability of workers to engage in collective action by hiring staff from multiple countries, and from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In those few cases where workers have joined together, they have met with harsh resistance from the companies. In 1981, 240 Central American workers went on strike aboard a Carnival Cruise Line ship in Miami to protest the firings of two co-workers. The company ended the strike by calling the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. The strikers were declared illegal immigrants, bussed to the airport and flown home, unemployed. In January 1986, Norwegian Cruise Line
solved a sudden labour dispute aboard the Norway by loading 55 South Korean, Jamaican, and Haitian room stewards on buses at the Port of Miami and sending most of them back to their home countries.

Supervisors on cruise ships often tell seafarers who complain, “If you don't like it here, you can go home.” Since the seafarer has already paid for the return trip, the threat is real and the seafarers know it will be carried out at their expense. Staff quickly learn to do their jobs and not to complain. A 27-year-old janitor from Saint Vincent, for instance, had his pay reduced from US$452 a month to US$37 while working for Carnival Cruise Line. He was clearly upset, and was not sure what prompted the reduction. But after five years with the company, he feared his supervisors would brand him a troublemaker if he complained. He endured the reduction in pay without question, rather than risk his job.

Employers exercise more subtle forms of control as well. Holland America Line prides itself on its Indonesian staff and crew. On a cruise aboard the Veendam in 1998, I asked a busboy handing out trays in a buffet line what it was like working with a surveillance camera on him (there was a camera mounted in the ceiling). His response was simple: “The Dutchman is always watching.” The traditional colonial relationship between the Dutch and Indonesians was being replicated on these ships.

Another level of social control is the onboard mafia, often found on ships where tips are expected. A waiter wanting to maximize his or her income is likely to have to share tips with a number of different folks. Waiters compete for larger stations, and for stations closer to the kitchen, by paying off the diningroom manager. Waiters may also need to pay off cooks, if they want their orders quickly, and the laundry staff if they want their uniforms cleaned on time. Similarly, room stewards often pay their housekeeping supervisor or the chief steward in order to be assigned more expensively priced rooms, where the tips will likely be bigger. They, too, will pay off the laundry staff in order to be among the first to receive fresh linens, and to have their uniforms cleaned and pressed. The ITF reports that some maitre d's have earned as much as US$20,000 a month by taxing workers' tips.

Sexual exploitation is one more element of social control. The cases receiving the most media attention have been rapes perpetrated by officers against “professional” staff. In one case, a 27-year-old nurse, who had been employed by Carnival Cruise Line, charged that she had been raped in 1998 by the ship's engineer while working on the Imagination. She immediately reported the incident and the engineer was promptly fired; not because of the rape, but because he had been drinking within six hours of going on duty and for being tardy. The nurse filed a suit against Carnival Cruise Line. The case was settled 15 months later, less than two weeks before its scheduled trial.

The victim of sexual assaults are often those with the least ability to speak up, because it would risk their employment. Victims are both male and female; the pattern is the same in either case. The worker is required to perform sexual favours in return for either keeping their job or for advancement. Jim Given of the ITF told me that he knew of several sexual predators who had histories spanning more than 15 years. In the case of women, the federation often learns of the
abuses. However, in the case of men, the social stigma associated with victimization by someone of the same sex makes disclosure difficult.

The obvious question is how such working conditions are allowed in an industry that operates largely from U.S. and Canadian ports. The answer is simple. Though many cruise-line companies are headquartered in the United States, they are registered in another country, they operate ships registered in other countries (sailing under foreign “flags of convenience”), and the ships sail in international waters. Sixty per cent of cruise ships are registered in either the Bahamas, Panama or Liberia.

By registering their ships in these countries, companies successfully avoid having to pay income taxes, and they also avoid having to abide by national labour laws – including health-and-safety legislation – and environmental regulations. They also avoid unions this way. The regulations that a ship must follow are those of the country where the ship is registered, and whose flag it flies.

Flags of convenience are clearly an economic benefit to a cruise line. They are also a benefit to the flag state. In 1995, Panama earned $47.5 million in ship-registration fees and annual taxes (five per cent of its federal budget), and another $50 million for maritime lawyers, agents and inspectors.

The Canadian government has been relatively silent on this issue. In the U.S., there have been regular calls in the U.S. Congress, and from the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board, that cruise lines operating from U.S. ports, carrying U.S. passengers, should be held to U.S. standards, regardless of where a ship is built, under what flag of convenience it is registered, and where its owners are headquartered. In addition, the ITF continues a campaign against flags of convenience on all ships, including freighters. So far, all efforts have had only limited impact.

“When I left [the] ship,” a former cruise-ship bar waitress told Paul Chapman, “I finally had a phone conversation with the owner. He only laughed at me and said I was wasting his time....” The worker had called to complain about the ship’s bar manager, who turned out, she told Chapman, “to be nothing but a constant source of trouble.” On the second night aboard, he approached her about going to bed with him. “He was a disgusting creep,” she says, “who just wouldn’t leave us alone – and he was our boss.

“I was very lucky that I had the money to get myself out of the rotten situation, but there are many who are not as fortunate. They have to stay and make the best of it, because they have families to support. [T]hat is the weakness which this disreputable cruise line exploits.” And that is the kind of exploitation that the ITF hopes, one day, to put an end to.

---------------------
Ross A. Klein teaches in the School of Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland. His book, Death by Chocolate: What You Must Know Before Taking a Cruise, was published by Breakwater Books. Since 1992, he has taken 30 cruises comprising close to 300 days. The workers in this article are not identified by name in order to avoid jeopardizing their employment.