

An update for Guild Members on the Topic of the Shortage of Canadian Seafarers – May 2023

For more than a decade, the Guild has been working with employers and industry stakeholders and government officials to attempt to address what has now become a critical shortage of qualified personnel available for work on board certain Canadian vessels. Despite the number of graduates coming out of Canadian marine schools, the number of seafarers retiring each year from the Canadian marine industry exceeds the number of new entrants. As a result, our industry is facing a shortage of personnel; particularly those holding high levels of certificates of competency, such as the qualifications of Master Mariner, Master Near Coastal, as well as First-class and Second-class Engineers. The shortage is now increasing and spreading to other certificates of competency. A recent federal government study indicates that over half of the remaining Canadian maritime workforce will retire over the next few years. This includes a further 52% of current engineering officers and 47% of deck officers. As we all know, these officer positions are critical for the operation of Canadian vessels. In the event that Canadian vessels become laid up due to a shortage of qualified personnel, this opens the door to an influx of foreign vessels sailing in the Canadian coasting trade by way of exemptions, with no Canadian seafarers aboard. A number of other countries have seen that such a tide is difficult to hold back or turn around.

Canada's maritime labour shortage problem is a multi-dimensional challenge, and so too must be the approach to solving it, as there are several contributing factors to this dilemma, all of which will require further attention.

As Guild members know, there are many requirements that need to be met in order to obtain a **Canadian** Certificate of Competency including that the applicant needs to be Canadian (either a citizen or a permanent resident). The Guild will continue to advocate against any proposals to amend the requirement of Canadian citizenship or permanent residency for obtaining a **Canadian** Certificate of Competency as a remedy for our sector's labour shortage. Instead, we will continue to focus on providing constructive recommendations intended to help develop an effective labour strategy to ensure that both Canada's marine industry and its seafarers prosper.

What are the initiatives that have been undertaken so far to mitigate this problem?

For many years the Guild has placed a high priority on attempting to have training properly funded, during collective bargaining with employers, and during meetings with government officials. The Guild contributes and participates as a champion of the newly-formed *Canadian Marine Careers Foundation*, and we hold a position on the Foundation's Board of Directors. The role of the Foundation is to pull together a coordinated approach by all stakeholders to work together to attract young Canadians to careers in the seafaring industry. The Foundation is still in its early days, but is actively pursuing outreach using social media, job fairs, school visits, and modern communication methods. This work is funded by the Guild and other member organizations. [**Imagine Marine – Discover Canadian Marine Industry Careers**](#)

The Guild has also been a strong supporter of an initiative by the Royal Canadian Navy in collaboration with Transport Canada, to recognize the valuable training that has been undertaken by naval personnel, and to establish equivalencies between certain naval qualifications and commercial marine certifications. This program has resulted in a number of veterans and reservists and former naval personnel being able to enter the commercial maritime industry to fill positions on Canadian vessels.

For a number of years the Guild has called for a program to assess the qualifications of new Canadians (permanent residents or citizens) who previously worked as seafarers in other countries, but after arriving in Canada have only been employed in occupations outside of our marine industry. This initiative has showed signs of success. Hundreds of new Canadians have applied to Transport Canada to have their foreign seafaring qualifications assessed, and have completed any gaps in their required training, and are now working alongside other Guild members. These are Canadians holding Canadian Certificates of Competency.

The federal government has also signed agreements with a number of other nations to recognize certain foreign certificates of competency on board Canadian-flag vessels when qualified Canadians are not available. A number of Guild members are extremely disappointed with this development and are not pleased to hear that unions are not consulted regarding these agreements signed with foreign nations. The seafaring community across the country, including unions, are informed of arrangements made with foreign countries by way of Ship Safety Bulletins; after the fact.

The position established by the National Board of the Guild regarding the recognition of foreign credentials aboard Canadian-flag vessels is that this is a temporary measure, and while it is far from ideal, it will enable Canadian-flag vessels to continue operating until a sufficient number of qualified Canadians become available. The Guild will be carefully monitoring this program to ensure that these foreign seafarers are only approved for employment on Canadian vessels if:

- A) they meet the legal requirements to work in Canada; and
- B) there are no qualified Canadians available to fill the position. That means all the qualified Canadians need to be already working, and the foreign seafarers will go to the bottom of the seniority list.

In the event that a Canadian seafarer is not available for a vacant position on board a Canadian vessel, then instead of the vessel remaining tied up due to lack of crew, or instead of a foreign ship being granted a license to undertake the work, then a foreign officer may be authorized by Transport Canada to work on the Canadian ship if they demonstrate acceptable language proficiency, acceptable knowledge of local regulations such as the Canadian Modifications to the International Collision Regulations, and if they obtain a visa and a work permit and if Transport Canada issues to them an endorsement recognizing their foreign certificate of competency. Once again, unions are not consulted regarding the Canadian government signing such arrangements with foreign nations, or even prior to signing free-trade agreements, and we are informed afterwards. The Guild will recommend that eligible candidates from among these seafarers should apply to become Canadians (permanent residents or citizens), as most of our ancestors did at one time. That way they can become eligible to apply for a **Canadian** Certificate of Competency, and contribute in a meaningful way to Canadian society, with a vested interest in filling a valuable role in our marine industry.

The federal government has signed agreements to recognize and evaluate the marine certificates of competency issued by the following countries: Australia, France, Norway, Ukraine, the Philippines and the United Kingdom.

The Guild will continue to carefully monitor the impact on our workforce of the use of foreign nationals temporarily occupying positions on Canadian vessels. Many Guild members have devoted their lives to working in the Canadian seafaring industry. Without any recognition or appreciation, Guild members have made significant sacrifices to keep marine commerce operating without interruption throughout pandemics and other serious challenges. Guild members work to ensure safety on the waterways and have a strong vested interest in the environmental protection of Canada's fragile marine ecosystems. The Guild will continue to engage with Members and employers and regulators across the country to ensure that these jobs aboard Canadian vessels remain well-paid Canadian jobs, that go to Canadians first.