A spotlight on the dark holds of the world economy

The sea holds an endless fascination. It has brought humans from different lands into contact for millennia. It is also a dangerous place where imaginary denizens of the deep like sea-monsters and mermaids have long lurked. The global structure of present-day capitalism is heavily underpinned by sea transport. Around 2 500 billion tonnes of goods were carried by sea in 1970, rising to over 8 000 billion tonnes by 2007.

Studies on the health and safety of seafarers are scarce. It is as if this key industry that keeps the global economy running goes as unseen as its cargo holds. This book by David Walters and Nick Bailey shines a penetrating light on this world. The authors take issue with the view that health and safety problems are just caused by natural hazards. Oceans and storms, shipwrecks and typhoons do play a part, but the real problem lies elsewhere. It is one of work organization and the structure of a profit-hungry industry.

The authors work from the scant data available on the health and safety of seafarers. The figures vary, but all converge on a high excess mortality of workers at sea compared to workers on land. A 2005 Norwegian study concluded that working in the merchant fleet increased the probability of a fatal work accident tenfold, while a British study published the same year put the risk at 28 times higher. Data on illnesses are even scarcer. There is a higher rate of infectious diseases among seafarers than shore workers. Exposure to chemical hazards is widespread and contributes to higher cancer-related mortality (see article p. 40). Levels of respiratory diseases, skin diseases and musculoskeletal disorders are worrying. The living conditions on ships are also responsible for alcohol abuse and contribute to high suicide rates.

Technological developments have facilitated the transport of goods, but have done little good for – if not actually harmed – the welfare of seafarers. They make work intensification and sophisticated forms of control over crews possible. Surveys point to a decline in the quality of services available to seafarers at sea and on shore. This is especially so for those from Africa, Asia and Latin America. A British study published in 2007 noted that “the provision for leisure, recreation, religious service and communications facilities are better in UK prisons than ... on many ships”.

A handful of multinationals have a stranglehold on the world merchant fleet of more than 100 000 vessels, with complex power structures linking company shareholders, shipmasters and principals, let alone the role of ports and insurers. This fragmentation of power takes advantage of the countless opportunities offered by the absence of rules, weak controls, difficulties of taking collective action in an international context. The International Maritime Organization has focused its action on developing a code whose main aim is to prevent major accidents and their environmental consequences. The problems of crew welfare and health are ignored and the code provides no mechanism for consultation of seafarers.

And yet history shows that they can form a real balancing force. From the 19th century on, crews have taken collective action through desertion and refusal to work on unseaworthy ships despite harsh crackdowns on the seamen. The International Federation of Transport Workers, created in 1896, has undergone a transformation in recent years from a permanent secretariat between national unions to becoming a global union organizing direct action and negotiating its claims with employers. The federation, which represents 600 000 seafarers, has its own network of trade union inspectors who have no compunction about boycotting ships and companies that violate workers’ rights.

Written for the non-specialist reader, this book explores the countless links between technological developments and employment relations. It ranges across the many aspects of an industry with an approach that combines sociology, the study of legal rules and the specific input of occupational health disciplines. Hopefully it will give an encouraging lead for other similar studies to emerge on other components of the world economy.

—Laurent Vogel

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Lives in Peril. Profit or Safety in the Global Maritime Industry?
David Walters and Nick Bailey