

## **Joint Statement by ECSA and FST<sup>1</sup>**

### **Is the EU Seafarer an Endangered Species? (Dublin Conference, December 17-18, 1996)**

#### **Dublin Follow-up Group**

##### **I. Introduction**

The European Commission organised a conference in Dublin at the end of 1996 with the collaboration of the Social Partners in maritime transport to consider employment and training possibilities for EU seafarers. The purpose of the Dublin Follow-up Group, meeting in Brussels on January 29, 1997, is to consider the implications of the evidence presented in Dublin and to suggest concrete proposals for action in the short, medium and long term.

Participants came from a wide range of maritime activities and interest groups, ranging from EU Commissioner Kinnock, responsible for maritime transport, national transport ministers, administrative officials, Members of the European Parliament, EU and OECD officials on the policy-making side of the spectrum to researchers, shipowners, seafarer representatives, academics and classification societies from the industry itself.

##### **II. Summary of principal findings**

At the end of the two-day event, there was no doubt that the answer to the question posed by the title of the conference - "Is the European Union Seafarer an Endangered Species" - was a resounding "yes". No dissenting voice was heard from the contributors or the audience as the urgency of the problem of the disappearing EU seafarer was reiterated by speaker after speaker.

Commissioner Kinnock considered the disappearance of the EU seafarer as inevitable if current trends persisted. However, he argued that a choice existed. Either one could regard this as "an epitaph to the end of an essential part of European maritime history" or one could view it as "a call to action" ' He preferred the second option and asked the conference to provide concrete proposals to reverse current trends "not for reasons of sentiment or nostalgia - but for the practical and forward looking purposes of employment, skills, safety and competitiveness".

Contributions by academics and researchers on the results of the most recent research work carried out in the area by the OECD, TecEcon, the ISF, and the University of Wales painted a bleak picture. Whereas European seafarer numbers have declined by more than 30 per cent over the past decade, current figures show that on the supply side there is an alarming shortfall which is predicted

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to continue unless urgent action is taken. This shortfall is even more critical when coupled with the reliable forecast that world seaborne trade is set to rise by around 70 per cent over the next decade. It will be further exacerbated by the implementation of the revised STCW convention, whereby traditional suppliers will be unable to meet the new required standards.

Bernard Gardiner of the University of Wales warned of the effects of the shortfall on shorebased industries. He spoke of an impending recruitment crisis in the shore based maritime related sector in the UK, the seeds of which were sown at least 15 years ago. "It is evident from these forecasts... that a gap in the balance of supply and demand will develop over the next, few years if it has not already occurred", he stated. Furthermore, it was his conclusion that additional recruitment was the most likely solution to the short term problem posed by the shortfall. Coupled with the likelihood that, faced with escalating wastage rates, UK shipowners would give up the training of British cadets altogether, he predicted that the British officer was "indeed a species which is in grave danger of extinction unless radical measures are adopted now to preserve the skills base at sea and avert the pending shore based recruitment crisis". The probability of similar shortfalls in other EU countries was high in his estimation, and the need for comparable EU wide research to be conducted was great "...without knowledge of shore based industry's requirements for people with seafaring experience on a European wide basis, the true dimensions of the problem posed by the decline of EU seafarer employment cannot be assessed nor, therefore, the nature or scale of the corrective action that may need to be taken", he concluded.

Both shipowners and seafarer representatives emphasized the need for quality shipping and quality crews. They recognized that the EU is particularly well placed to make a major contribution to the growing requirements for highly trained seafarers in the EU fleet and elsewhere. Both sides of the industry recognized the urgent need for an EU initiative in the provision of funding for seafarer training to avert the inevitable tragedy of losing the European maritime skill base.

The inadequacy of existing EU programmes to support training in the maritime sector were highlighted not only by the industry representatives but by the researchers. The Tecnecon study stated that "the present diverse nature of maritime recruitment, training and working is such that current sources of EU social, regional and grantfunding are not offering significant assistance in most EU countries to this important sector of EU industry and employment".

### **III. The Next Step**

Given the evidence summarized above, the Dublin Follow-up Group proposes the following recommendations for action:

- A high level Round Table to consider innovative ways of providing EU funding for seafarer training, including on-board training.
- A series of political briefings between the Social Partners and the relevant high-level EU political decision-makers to deepen the debate and seek openings for solutions. This should include policy-makers not only from DG VII, but especially from DG XVI and DG XXII.
- An EU-wide study on maritime infrastructure focusing on the requirement for people with seafaring skills in land-based jobs, building on the study commissioned by the UK government and carried out by the University of Wales.

- An industry-led study on identifying the training needs in each Member State and examining EU funding possibilities.
- Efforts should be made to secure financial support from targeted shore industries for the training of seafarers.
- The establishment, preferably in the framework of the Joint Committee on Maritime Transport, of a Commission-led Seafarer Employment and Training Coordinating Body with the Social Partners to centralize all considerations of matters related to seafarer recruitment, training and employment. Currently, these issues are being discussed in several different forums in an uncoordinated fashion such as in the Maritime Industries Forum, the Inter-Panel Working Group on Human Resources, the AMRIE FEMAR initiative, the Joint Committee on Maritime Transport, the Fourth and Fifth Framework Programmes, the Concerted Action on Maritime Education and Training and of course, the Dublin Follow-up Group.