



A bold voice for transportation workers

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF THE JONES ACT

On June 5th of this year, we will celebrate the centennial of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, commonly referred to as the Jones Act. Principally, the Act ensures that domestic waterborne commerce is conducted by U.S. built ships crewed with qualified U.S. mariners. It is rare that any piece of legislation stands as the bedrock of an industry for so long – the Jones Act was passed just a few months after Prohibition, and 15 years before the creation of Social Security. Yet its continued endurance is a testimony to its unparalleled importance to the domestic sectors it supports. Today, it has never been clearer why the Jones Act is necessary and why policy makers' long-held support for it must not waver.

The Act's requirement for U.S. mariners aboard domestic vessels ensures that our maritime industry can support good paying, safe, and dignified union jobs. It is not hyperbole to say that without the Act, unscrupulous companies will race to replace U.S. workers with foreign and unqualified mariners, forced to work in dangerous conditions with negligible pay. Examples of what this might look like play out daily across the globe, where foreign companies abandoning sick or injured employees in faraway ports is a commonplace occurrence. One hundred years later, the Jones Act remains the single most powerful tool to protect mariners and ensure the continued existence of a domestic maritime workforce.

Today, our nation's waterways are navigated by the 40,000 Jones Act compliant vessels built in this country. The construction, maintenance and upgrading of these vessels is responsible for keeping the lights on at dozens of shipyards and factories, supporting well over 100,000 jobs. However, the shipbuilding industry is under constant threat from unfair foreign competition. Many of these shipbuilders seeking access to the U.S. market are highly state subsidized, and none are subject to the domestic content, environmental, and labor requirements placed on U.S. companies. By mandating that U.S. made ships sail between U.S. ports and harbors, the Jones Act continues to guarantee we will have the ability and workforce needed to build vessels in this country.

The Jones Act also plays a key national security role. Shipyards that construct Navy ships rely on commercial orders in between military contracts. Domestic mariners similarly wear two hats, and can be called upon to crew government and privately-owned ships to provide additional sealift and surge capacity in times of war or humanitarian crisis. In the absence of the Jones Act, recreating these capacities strictly for military purposes would take years and cost billions of dollars.

Despite 100 years of success, attacks on the Act continue unabated, largely from anti-union interests who see profit in abandoning U.S. mariners and shuttering shipyards for substandard alternatives abroad. As we have for the past century, we will continue to turn back unfounded and bad faith efforts to repeal the Act and highlight its continued necessity.

Commitment to the Jones Act in its second century must extend beyond simply supporting the status quo. While the Act has served as bulwark against the worst of attacks on the maritime industry, we are still faced with a shortage of mariners and shipyards in desperate need of new business. Fortunately, our Congressional allies are also looking to the future.

The Energizing American Shipbuilding Act (H.R. 382), introduced by Congressman John Garamendi (D-CA), would mandate that a modest percentage of liquefied natural gas exports sail on tanker vessels built in U.S. shipyards. The Short Sea Shipping Act (H.R. 5351), introduced by Congressmen Brian Higgins (D-NY) and Mike Kelly (R-PA) would eliminate a quirk in the tax code that discourages the use of commercial vessels for the carriage of commodities along American's seacoasts and inland waterways. In turn, this legislation would create jobs for mariners and drive new construction of appropriate vessels. Finally, Congress continues to examine strategies to encourage members of the military to transition into careers as civilian merchant mariners. We strongly support these efforts.

Since 1920, the Jones Act has been a legislative success story that keeps our nation prepared to meet domestic and international challenges, while sustaining a domestic manufacturing capacity critical maritime workforce. Despite countless attacks and often-treacherous political seas, the Act continues to prove its worth, while America's maritime and shipbuilding workforces have shown their productivity, professionalism and perseverance. These are worth celebrating as we mark the Act's 100th anniversary, just as they are proof that we must pursue policies that will strengthen it for the future.

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