



Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO

REDEFINING AN INDUSTRY: UPDATED EDUCATION POLICIES CAN STRENGTHEN THE U.S. MARITIME WORKFORCE

The United States is experiencing an acute shortage of professional mariners indispensable to U.S. national security, economic security, and humanitarian response efforts as a global peace leader. In 2017, the U.S. Maritime Administration found that the United States is approximately 1,800 mariners short of what is sufficient to mobilize a drawn-out military effort exceeding 4-6 months. Today, that number is much higher. With the war in Ukraine entering its second year and escalating U.S.-China tensions, the shortage of U.S. Merchant Mariners threatens U.S. national security. In a post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, a whole-of-government approach is necessary to address significant maritime industry workforce concerns in recruitment and retention.

We call on Congress and the Biden Administration to implement aggressive strategies to resolve the mariner workforce gap by increasing enrollment at maritime academies and other maritime training institutions by breaking down financial barriers to entering the industry. Congress and the Biden Administration should increase student incentive payments for mariner education and training; subsidize expenses for academies and schools so costs are not shifted to the pockets of cadets and other entry-level mariners; and allow licensed and unlicensed merchant mariners to receive student loan forgiveness when they enter the workforce.

In times of peace, Merchant Mariners work on commercial vessels, transporting imports and exports by sea. In times of war, these same highly skilled civilian merchant mariners are called into service by the Department of Defense to move troops and materials on U.S.-flag commercial vessels and government owned vessels. Most of the skilled maritime officers working aboard these vessels are graduates of the federal U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) or from one of the State Maritime Academies. Officers who graduate from USMMA commit to serving our country as licensed Merchant Marine Officers and commissioned officers in the Armed Forces for a minimum of five years. In addition to USMMA, the six additional State Maritime Academies are located in California, Michigan, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas provide cadets with the at-sea training necessary to become a licensed merchant marine officer.

Increase Student Incentive Payments to Attract Prospective Students

The Strategic Sealift Midshipman Program is an education and training program conducted by the Department of Naval Science at the USMMA and six State Maritime Academies. Cadets who enroll in this program can receive Student Incentive Payments of up to \$32,000 (\$8,000 per school year) while at the State Maritime Academies. In doing so, cadets must maintain their license for six years, sail on their license for three years, and maintain their commission in the U.S. Navy Reserve as Strategic Sealift Officers. We call on Congress to increase the maximum Student Incentive Payments from \$32,000 to \$64,00 to increase interest in the Strategic Sealift Midshipman Program amongst cadets attending state maritime academies and increase the number of graduates who have an obligation to sail on their license for a minimum of three years after graduation.

Increase Fuel Funding for Training Ships to Lower Attendance Costs for Cadets

Cadets attending Maritime Academies must complete Sea Year training to give cadets practical knowledge of the performance and operating characteristics of various vessels and operating requirements in different trade routes. It also enables cadets to obtain the at-sea training days necessary to become eligible for a U.S. Coast Guard merchant officer license examination. Sea Year training usually occurs during a cadet's sophomore year, followed by a more extended sailing period in their junior year.

Unfortunately, Sea Year Training is very costly; vessel fueling is the primary cost. To increase enrollment in Sea Year training and grow the pool of professional mariners, Congress should provide fuel subsidies for training vessels operated by State Maritime Academies. Fuel subsidies should also be provided for State Maritime Academy-owned and leased vessels that provide cadets with the option of obtaining the Dedicated Duty Engineer and Mate of Towing license endorsements.

Allow U.S. Merchant Mariners to be eligible for Loan Forgiveness

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness program encourages individuals to enter and continue full-time public service employment by forgiving their remaining balance after completing specific public service and loan payment requirements. Qualifying employment includes the U.S. military and government organizations at the federal, state, local, or tribal level. The Maritime Administration relies on the U.S. Merchant Marine to crew the National Defense Reserve Fleet and Ready Reserve Fleet for civil maritime transportation support to military mobilizations and respond to national emergencies. U.S. Merchant Mariners sailing on board U.S. flagged vessels at least 180 days per year should be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness as they are critical to national and economic security.

Supporting Recruitment of Unlicensed Mariners and Union Schools

Professional mariners who are not officers, also known as ratings, or unlicensed mariners, are just as important, uniquely qualified, and in high demand as licensed mariners. They also face financial barriers and prohibitive entry-level expense loads. Many become members of maritime unions and are supported by union training funds and schools. Yet even with that support, some costs threaten their continuing certification and credentialing.

Congress should also allow unlicensed mariners to be eligible for grant funding and forgivable loans that offset the initial financial outlays required of persons new to the maritime trades. This would serve as a recruitment aid to the good jobs in the offshore sector necessary to national security. Union schools and training programs should likewise be eligible for federal grants to schools that not only provide the training but also attach that training to the jobs that produce commitment and retention to bolster the nation's sealift readiness.

Beyond training, there should be funding for educational materials and trained advisors to counsel existing mariners on gaining seagoing credentials. Helping inland mariners make the transition to a different set of requirements for offshore seagoing work, for example, or aiding veterans in re-employment at sea, are fertile areas for the growth and development of this vital workforce. There should also be support for U.S. regulatory adaptation such as that proposed by the Merchant

Marine Personnel Advisory Committee to recognize and meet world standards on the sea time required for upgrades from entry-level ratings to Able Seafarer/Deck and Able Seafarer/Engine, making it easier to achieve the qualifications necessary for a sustainable job.

Throughout history, U.S. Merchant Mariners have played a central role in America's economic growth, military preparedness, national security, and disaster relief efforts. Recently, pandemic supply chain issues have demonstrated how crucial it is for the United States to have a qualified mariner pool in order to become more self-reliant in transporting commercial goods, energy production, and cargo transportation. In addition to supporting mariner recruitment efforts, Congress and the Administration must continue to support fundamental legislation like the Jones Act, Cargo Preference laws, and the Maritime Security Program. Strong support for these vital laws and implementing policies that support mariner education will grow the U.S. mariner pool and uplift the U.S. Maritime Industry.

Policy Statement No. S23-04
Adopted May 17, 2023