

Operations

Record numbers of vessels abandoned



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The number of vessel abandonments has soared nearly 33% year-on-year, with 158 cases already recorded by May 2025, compared to 119 at the same point last year, according to new figures released by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

These cases have impacted at least 1,501 seafarers—many of whom have been left unpaid, without food, water, or medical care, and in some cases denied access to port facilities for months. The ITF says the trend highlights a worsening humanitarian crisis in the global shipping industry.

"Abandonment is a growing, systemic problem," said Stephen Cotton, ITF general secretary. "Behind every number is a human being who has been failed by the industry and the governments responsible for regulating it. The fact that we're on track to break last year's appalling record is a sign that urgent reform is needed."

Vessel abandonment typically occurs when shipowners walk away from their financial and legal obligations, leaving crews marooned onboard

with no wages or supplies. The ITF and its global inspectorate network have stepped in to recover unpaid wages, reclaiming more than \$58.1m in 2024, including \$13.5m for abandoned crews.

So far in 2025, the ITF has recovered an additional \$4.1m for seafarers impacted by abandonment. However, with abandonment cases climbing sharply, the ITF says its ability to respond is being stretched—and enforcement mechanisms are failing.

"We're dealing with owners who vanish, often protected by substandard registries that do nothing," said Steve Trowsdale, head of the ITF inspectorate. "It's often impossible to even identify who owns the vessel. This growing impunity is what makes the situation so dangerous."

According to the ITF, the flag of convenience (FOC) system lies at the heart of the crisis, allowing vessels to register under countries with weak regulatory oversight, minimal taxation, and limited transparency. Today, over 50% of the world's merchant fleet is registered in FOC states, which account for more than 80% of known abandonment cases.

In response to recent abuses, the ITF has added Tuvalu and Guinea Bissau to its official FOC list, bringing the total to 45 countries. Both nations have been linked to shadow fleets that move sanctioned cargo and evade scrutiny.

"Shipping is the engine of global trade, yet its workers are treated as disposable," Cotton said. "We must expose and reform the FOC system. Every vessel must carry a flag that proves a transparent, traceable link to its true beneficial owner."

The ITF is calling for a global overhaul of vessel registration systems and more robust enforcement tools for regulators. Key reforms include mandating transparency in vessel ownership, empowering authorities to detain vessels linked to wage theft or abandonment, establishing international accountability standards for FOC registries, and ensuring guaranteed food, wages, and repatriation for seafarers left stranded.

"Only through a genuine link between a vessel and its owner—and the political will to enforce international maritime law—can we end this crisis," Cotton said.

With more than 1.5m seafarers supporting 90% of world trade, the ITF has warned that without decisive action, abandonment could become a new norm in global shipping.

#Seafarers

Comments



caqui

May 30, 2025 at 10:29 pm

I believe they didn't complete the work permit to paint on the hulling.
Owner may complain about it



David Boffey

June 1, 2025 at 11:25 am

Bless.

 NUSPM