



An Open Letter to the Membership:

In the last issue of the Marine Officer, I wrote about the brash pirate attacks on M.E.B.A.-crewed vessels. These attacks vividly illustrate the everyday dangers of serving in the US Merchant Marine. However, threats to members' physical safety are not the only hazards facing our way of life. Daily, the M.E.B.A. faces and diffuses regulatory challenges at all levels of government. The election of a Democratic President and Congress was a significant victory for organized labor. But, because the needs of US flag shipping cross party affiliation, we must remain vigilant in order to ensure our friends in government do not crush our cause with other policy initiatives. Only by actively working with our friends on both sides of the aisle can we fight off present and future challenges.

As the Obama administration turns from dealing with the immediate demands of the financial crisis to its own policy agenda, there is a risk that the competitiveness of the US flag will be regulated away. Recently, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed new regulations that would significantly increase the burden on US flag shippers. These regulations are poorly designed – in some cases the technology required to meet the requirements has not even been invented. Even worse, the EPA intends to discriminate to apply the new regulations to US flag shippers sooner and with more severity than foreign shippers using US ports. The M.E.B.A. is aggressively opposing these regulations until equal rules for US and foreign-flag shippers can be secured.

Many M.E.B.A. members have recently reported problems with obtaining or renewing their Coast Guard licenses. In some cases, the problems are systemic – the Coast Guard is understaffed and employs outdated procedures to process mariners' claims. In other instances, individual members have fallen victim to arbitrary agency action and old-fashioned mistakes. We recently met again with top Coast Guard officials to address the systemic problems. The agency has pledged improvements to the existing system. If you have been individually affected in the attempt to renew your license, I urge you to contact Headquarters so that we may offer assistance.

As you are no doubt aware, accomplishing objectives in Washington can be expensive. But, I will not permit the current governmental challenges to derail one of my administration's primary objectives, correcting the M.E.B.A.'s finances. To that end, I have worked hard to ensure that our regulatory defenses are not only effective but cost-conscious. Specifically, the M.E.B.A. now completes more of its regulatory work in-house instead of contracting out to expensive, external lawyers. In addition to fulltime counsel, the M.E.B.A. has taken on interns from top area law schools that are being utilized for time-consuming research. Legislatively, I am working closely with the American Maritime Congress and various industry associations that amplify our voice and ensure that the M.E.B.A. does not have to shoulder the entire financial burden of fighting these battles. I continue to have good news to report; after years of continuous budget deficits, the M.E.B.A. ran a surplus for the first six months of this fiscal year. Given the economic climate, our surplus is an accomplishment which I am genuinely proud to report.

As the recession continues to eliminate jobs at organizations large and small, I am especially mindful of the importance of generating new work. To that end, the M.E.B.A. continues to deliver the jobs on which our members depend by signing up the LIBERTY PRIDE, APL AGATE and APL JAPAN as well as renewing the NCL and Matson contracts, along with a new MOU with Interlake. At the same time, the M.E.B.A.'s renewed presence in the international LNG fleet – through our contract with Exmar/Alaris – makes our union the number one provider of U.S. licensed officers to this profitable trade. As the economy picks up, I am confident we will add other work to these successes.

In Unity and Friendship,

Don Keefe