



MEBA POLITICAL ACTION HELPS MUSTER SMOOTH SAILING

This issue of the 'Marine Officer' focuses on our Washington lobbying and political action efforts. One of the most critical things we as a Union can do to ensure the long term strength of the Merchant Marine is to educate Congress and the Administration on who we are and what we do. From writing letters and visiting with your members of Congress, to contributing to the MEBA Political Action Fund, your participation in the political process at home and through the Union is a key factor in our future success.

Right now Congress is grappling with many issues important to MEBA, from pension reform to health care and merchant mariner veterans' benefits. Other issues on the Congressional legislative agenda include riding gangs and the nation's energy policy as well as foreign control over American ports. The decisions made by Congress on these and many other issues will affect us all. Now, more than ever, MEBA needs a loud, knowledgeable and clear voice in our nation's capital. Working together, we can ensure a vibrant and robust Merchant Marine that will set the stage for a strong maritime labor presence for the next several decades.

I recently attended the Maritime Trades Department and the AFL-CIO Winter Executive Board meetings in San Diego, California. One subject kept popping up among the wide variety of issues facing the labor movement. That topic was the rising cost of health care and medical benefits in America. From the MEBA rank-and-file to the most powerful members of the House and Senate, everyone is concerned about health care. It is obvious that we as a nation have got to focus on these health care issues that have been looming over us – something must be done to stem the tide of this crisis. We've all seen how soaring costs have directly affected MEBA's Medical Plan and know that our active and retired members are paying more for health care. The general consensus among those of us in San Diego was that the only way this epidemic can be brought under control is through political action in Washington D.C. Our membership's support for our lobbying and political efforts on Capitol Hill has never been more important.

One pleasant surprise at the MTD meeting was when Capt. Robert Johnston, Senior V.P., Head of Shipping Operations for Overseas Shipholding Group (OSG) announced that the company had begun

to move forward on the process of constructing up to 14 additional American-flag tankers. These new vessels are in addition to the 10 ships that OSG is building in the Aker Philadelphia Shipyard and their three MSP vessels now operating under the American Flag. OSG is positioning itself to be the largest U.S.-flag tanker company in the United States. In San Diego, I had a long conversation with Bob Johnston, and we discussed ways to make the MEBA-OSG partnership as strong as possible. Bob is determined to make OSG a U.S.-flag giant and his company is willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars investing in the new tonnage it needs to achieve that goal. He told me that they are looking into every aspect of U.S.-flag shipping, including securing long-term operating charters from the Military Sealift Command and Department of Defense in order to invest in newbuild tankers to replace the aging T-5 government tanker fleet. I assured Bob that MEBA is committed to doing everything in our power to make OSG's business plan a reality. All members of the MEBA can agree that this is great news. It represents the rebirth of the American flag tanker fleet, a fleet which has slowly withered away over the last 25 years.

OSG isn't the only company with newbuilds on the way. Norwegian Cruise Lines-America is set to welcome the largest U.S.-flag passenger vessel ever built, the PRIDE OF HAWAII, which recently finished construction at Germany's Meyer Werft shipyard.

The vessel is set to begin her sea trials in mid-March before joining the other two NCL-AMERICA ships in the Hawaii trade in April 2006. The PRIDE OF HAWAII, like the PRIDE OF ALOHA and PRIDE OF AMERICA, is crewed with MEBA officers in all licensed position. Each of these ships operates with approximately 27-32 MEBA officers.

Back home, Aker Philadelphia Shipyard is wrapping up work on another newbuild for Matson Navigation Company. The 681-foot M/V MAUNALEI is the last of a four ship series built at the yard for the company since 2003. Matson has already begun to put their newbuilds to good use. Earlier this year, they announced their new China-Long Beach Express and new dedicated Guam and Micronesia service.

Each of these wins for MEBA wouldn't have been possible had it not been for the legislative and political action of maritime labor and the maritime industry in D.C. Whether it was the passage of tonnage tax legislation or the promotion of cruise ship legislation by maritime-friendly lawmakers, we have all seen first hand how important our presence in Washington D.C. has been and will continue to be for the future success of our Union. ■

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