Global Issues

Stranded Assets: Wartime Work in the Gulf

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Introduction: 'A Busy, Crucial, and Relatively Conflict-Free Trade Route'

On June 12th, 2025 – about 10 days before the US strikes on Iranian nuclear sites – a ship called the Berkat Tuah sailed into the Gulf. The Malaysian and Indonesian crew aboard spent a few months running supplies back and forth from Sharjah to one of the many gas fields out at sea. Nothing about this is exceptional: as the New York Times put it, "the Strait of Hormuz had been a busy, crucial and relatively conflict-free trade route. Every month, thousands of ships passed through the strait, and one-fifth of the world's oil supply depended on it" (Gross and Eavis, 2026).

In October, however, their employer stopped paying their wages. 'Financial difficulties' led to disputes over who owned the ship (Loh, 2026), and in December – after two months with no payment – the crew qualified as officially abandoned (ILO, 2026). In the following months, the US and Israel intensified their bombardment. Throughout all this time, the crew remained stuck at Hamriyah Port, receiving no payment, unable to leave the ship and return home. Their insurance expired in February – just as the bombs started dropping again – and was not renewed. In late March, Iran shut down the Strait of Hormuz.

Case notes on the ILO/IMO Joint Database of Abandoned Seafarers detail the "deep psychological and mental distress' of the crew," that could lead to "potential tragedy o[r] suicide". In a candid appeal for intervention around a number of ships – including this one – the ILO stated that "All possible efforts by our representatives to engage with flag states, port authorities, P&I clubs[1], and ship agents, have not yet resulted in any tangible improvement in the crews' wellbeing" – a sobering acknowledgement of the limitations of intervening meaningfully in the labyrinthine structures of maritime trade.

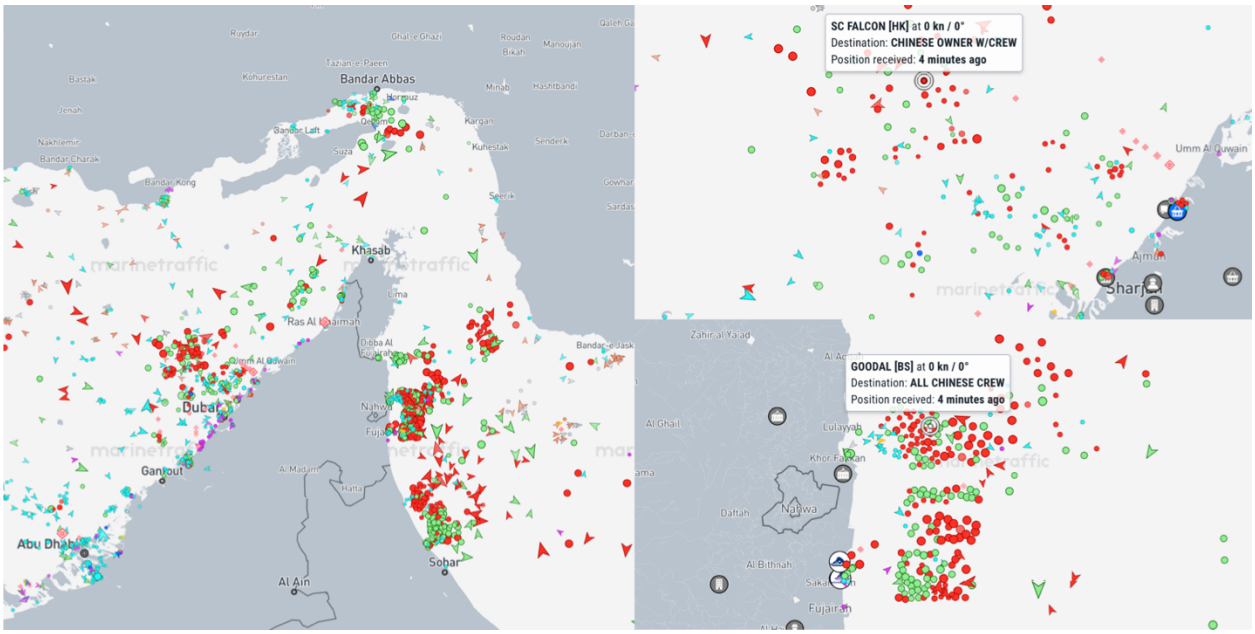
The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) approved a payment of $1000 to the seafarers' families, offsetting the risk of them taking on high-interest loans at home to cover the missed wages: a common practice amongst the families of abandoned seafarers as households inadvertently absorb the unpaid debts of shipowners (Bolton, 2024). After nine months stuck on a metal boat

[1] P&I (Protection and Indemnity) Clubs are mutual insurance associations created by shipowners to provide coverage for a broader range of liabilities than traditional marine insurance.

without power in the beating sun, crew members were repatriated in June 2026 thanks to a diplomatic intervention from Malaysia, with the last of the crew finally heading home on the 21st of July.

With or without a war, this was not an isolated incident. 2025 set yet another abandonment record: over six thousand seafarers cut off and unpaid, with the Gulf once again the world's hotspot (ITF, 2026). Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain have not ratified the ILO's Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), meaning seafarers left in Gulf ports after shipowners cut ties have little legal leverage to get what they're owed, or get home. Much well-intentioned narration of the current shipping crisis has overlooked this: *The Guardian*, for example, notes that "what should have been a *normal* journey when they passed through the strait and entered the Gulf back in February has turned into a long and stressful waiting game" [emphasis added] (Partridge, 2026) – for the crew aboard the Berkat Tuah or one of the many other abandoned ships that also made a 'normal' transit through the strait, the 'long and stressful waiting game' pre-exists any war.

Figure 1: Left: Ships waiting at anchorages in both the Persian / Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Top right: Dubai and Sharjah Anchorage (note the ship broadcasting 'Chinese Owner w/ Crew' as destination). Bottom right: Ships waiting at Khor Fakkan and Fujairah Anchorage.



Source: Screenshots taken from MarineTraffic (www.marinetraffic.com), 18th August 2026.

Whose Risk, on Whose Terms?

Before the war, ship transits through the Strait of Hormuz – primarily oil tankers and bulk carriers – averaged about 130 a day. Since its effective closure in late February, this figure has fallen to low double or even single digits, with only a handful of vessels making the transit on a daily basis. Figure 1 shows broadcast locations of ships in the Gulf on 18 August 2026, many of them densely clustered at port anchorages on either side of the strait, waiting to leave. The International Maritime Organisation

estimates that around 20,000 seafarers remain stuck aboard these ships (IMO, 2026). Much of the coverage of shipping in the Gulf has focused on the risks of being struck by a missile while passing the strait. This is, of course, a very real and very dire workplace risk. But this approach to risk in the region masks the routine, durational and more ambient forms of labour exploitation in the Gulf that preceded the war but are also intensified by it: abandoned crews, unpaid wages and the physical and mental toil of languishing on ships with no power, no food and no means to return home.

In an industry publication, a tanker ship captain who flew into the Gulf to replace another is lauded as a hero, making sacrifices to keep the wheels of global trade turning. In an interview, he stated that he accepted the job because "somebody had to be there with the remaining crew, and the maritime trade should keep going" (Minchin and Göksedef, 2026). When eight of this ship's crew went on to refuse to make the transit as ships in the queue around them started getting hit, they were repatriated and replaced with another eight workers, who were made to sign letters accepting responsibility for risks. By heroising the captain as a key worker braving the strait to keep oil flowing, this framing applauds a form of risk-taking that serves the interests of commodity traders much more than seafarers. Whilst maritime labour is a crucial workforce that is all-too-often overlooked, the moral urgency with which the work is narrated risks making veneration its own form of reward, in lieu of any material improvements of working conditions aboard ships, in ways reminiscent of the UK government encouraging the public to applaud nurses in 2020 whilst rejecting a pay increase.

'Flexibility of Implementation'

If one challenge is to narrate wartime labouring conditions in ways that don't lose sight of non-spectacular forms of exploitation, another is to understand how these non-spectacular forms of exploitation are precisely what shape wartime labouring conditions. War becomes a labour issue at the point of definition: no place inherently or automatically becomes a 'war zone', rather, it is a designation declared by particular bodies.

So what are seafarers' rights in times of war? Nominally, all seafarers are protected under the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), which stipulates a right to repatriation if a ship is bound for a war zone. However, to understand what this protection constitutes in practice it is important to appreciate just how hollowed out and watered down the Convention has become in its attempt to seek ratification from as many member states as possible – what the ILO euphemistically refers to as 'flexibility of implementation'.

Each MLC regulation is divided into standards (category A) and guidelines (category B). Part A of the code is mandatory, whereas part B of the code isn't, simply requiring ratifying countries to "give due consideration to following the Guidelines" (ILO, 2006: 10). Port State Control (PSC) - the main instrument for enforcing the Convention - does not verify implementation of part B of the Code during inspections (ILO 2026: 95). Entitlement to repatriation in the case of a ship bound for a war zone is covered under the MLC *not* as a standard but as a guideline (B2.5.1), effectively functioning more as a recommendation than a binding rule. The role the MLC can play in this war is thus limited not only by the fact that the Strait of Hormuz is surrounded by the abovementioned non-ratifying states, but also by the fact that its repatriation and refusal rights are *de facto* optional.

Further protections depend on the kind of collective bargaining agreements (CBA) that apply to each vessel. For vessels flying national flags, national CBAs apply, but the vast majority of ships active in the Gulf are registered under so-called flags of convenience (FOC). Around half of all FOC vessels worldwide have a CBA in place with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). In a war situation, the ITF together with their maritime employer counterparts can declare a particular area a "Warlike Operations Area" (WOA), as they did with the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman on 5 March 2026. This declaration triggers additional employment protections including the right of refusal, the right to repatriation, and a bonus of 100% the daily basic wage, but only applies to vessels covered by ITF-approved agreements. Using the ITF's publicly available search function for looking up whether a vessel is covered by an ITF-approved agreement, we mapped a sample of 500 vessels present in the Gulf between 9 and 17 August 2026, and found that 401 (80.2%) did not have any active ITF-approved agreements on board. Available crew list data for the vessels suggests an average of about 20 crew members on board each vessel, so this sample represents around 10,000 seafarers. The sample suggests it likely that on board the majority of vessels currently stuck in the Gulf, the ITF cannot contractually enforce WOA repatriation and compensation rights: if the seafarers on board these vessels want to cut their contracts short, they may be liable not only for their own repatriation costs but the costs of replacing them may be further deducted from their wages.

Regardless of which contracts seafarers have, the most significant barrier to repatriation remains that no seafarer can be repatriated unless a replacement crew member is willing to take their place. While repatriation may be formulated as a 'right' on paper, in practice, the repatriation of seafarers from the Gulf relies on finding other workers desperate enough to fly into a warzone to take their place. This reflects a structural pattern that we have consistently found in our work mapping seafarer abandonment over the past five years. In cases of abandonment, crews awaiting repatriation are sometimes prevented from leaving until a so-called 'skeleton' crew can replace them. Furthermore, even when repatriation is technically possible, seafarers may choose to stay aboard the ship as this represents their only true bargaining chip to secure their owed wages, which, in cases of bankruptcy, are likely to come from the auctioning off of the vessel. Retaining a link to the vessel to stake a claim on its monetary value (generally in scrap metal) requires staying on board. Shipowners often exploit seafarers' emotional and material deprivation - homesickness, lack of supplies - to push them to accept repatriation without receiving their wages, which often amount to far more than the cost of a flight home.

Enforcing these rights in practice is its own gargantuan task involving tracking down individual shipowners hiding behind layers of shell corporations and negotiating not just repatriation but also unpaid wages, including finding replacement workers willing to do the job. Situating shipping labour in the Gulf within the long-running practice of abandonment shows that the war-time labour protections extended to seafarers simply reflect the workings of the industry in general, and therein lies the less exceptional violence that underwrites it.

After War, After Oil

Since the early days of the pandemic, media attention on seafarers and the framing of their role as essential workers in the global economy has ebbed and flowed in tandem with large-scale economic

disruptions. To counter the post-crisis amnesia that is likely to follow any declaration that the war is over, our task must be to hold together the very real and life-threatening dangers specific to this moment without losing sight of the fact that the Gulf is *always* a danger zone for seafarers, not due to missiles but due to much more mundane, normalized, and invisibilised mechanisms of abandonment that put them at risk of prolonged periods of waiting on board, without supplies, without wages, and without knowing when they will get to return home. In this piece we've tried to highlight not only the importance of recognising both forms of violence, but also of understanding how the former is exacerbated by the latter.

In terms of fossil fuels, it's hard to see things going all the way back to how they were before the war. This has implications for those who make their livelihoods from transporting or processing hydrocarbons and their many derivatives and byproducts (fertiliser, polymers, urea, sulfur, bitumen, etc). Although oil majors are posting some of the highest quarterly profits in years, lasting damage to fossil fuel circuits now seems inevitable. As Adam Hanieh (2025) shows, since the early 2000s more oil from the Gulf now flows east rather than west, to the factories and markets of South-East Asia. The 30% drop in China's crude oil imports is globally significant, with far-reaching ripple effects in manufacturing (Downs & Meidan, 2026). Kate MacKenzie and Tim Sahay (2026) have been documenting the implications of demand destruction, as states find energy independence in renewables. At the household level, people are switching en masse from fossil-dependent everyday appliances to electric ones, such as the mass turn away from LPG stoves to induction hobs in India.

With cautious optimism (oil and gas extraction, of course, has a habit of reproducing itself through the making of new markets), it seems that some states have started to make a meaningful move away from fossil dependence, investing quickly in electrification. The shift in labour demand that this entails is hard to tell, but union movements ought to take care to avoid what Ziadah (2026) recently called a "bread-and-butter" unionism, in which the protection of jobs for jobs' sake comes before more structural movements to depart from fossil fuel dependence and the militaristic, extractive tendencies it propagates. In the UK, the head of GMB recently doubled down on dependence, arguing that "the escalating conflict in the Middle East shows it's absolutely vital that the UK has a secure domestic oil and gas supply" (GMB, 2026). IndustriAll, the global union representing 50 million workers in energy, manufacturing and mining, criticised the speed at which governments across EU and Asia were pivoting to solar, wind and battery, without being in dialogue with (or even sure of the existence of) the workforce that could make it happen.

If there is to be a meaningful shift towards cleaner and safer energy infrastructure then states and international bodies will have to carefully consider how those building, transporting and maintaining it are provided for, avoiding the webs of obscurity and evasion through which shipowners dodge accountability, and within which thousands of seafarers in the Gulf and beyond continue to find themselves tangled.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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