

(GILLIAN ENNIS)

Serving Seafarers have a well-developed scepticism about shore 'experts' who cook up ideas and schemes under the name of 'progress' which have direct and not always welcome effects on those on the ship.

A first look at the objectives and activities of the Sealife Programme could well produce familiar groans of "They're at it again; here's someone else trying to solve our problems - promises, promises . . . ." On closer inspection, though, there might be enough about Sealife which is different, to offer a reasonable chance of getting some important long-term improvements in life at sea. In the following article the Chairman of the Programme, John Dawson of Hunting & Son Ltd., tries to explain this rather novel approach to the industry's manpower difficulties.

Sealife has been going for two years now, having started from serious worries in 1974 that the industry was running out of manpower. After a special recruiting campaign and a push to get companies to sign up more trainees, some of the top people in the then British Shipping Federation recognised that the problem might not be just about pay and leave alone. They decided to ask all the seafaring unions and the Department of Trade if they would support a joint fundamental re-appraisal of the industry's approach to seafaring manpower matters.

This was agreed on the basis that the purpose of the Programme would be "To examine ways in which life at sea in the U.K. shipping industry can be made more attractive to the U.K. seafarer." And under this flag Sealife went down the slipway in March 1975.

Rather than try to describe all the developments since then, the flavour of Sealife is perhaps better conveyed by illustrating the sort of question being asked, and how the work is being tackled. But first a few facts about the way Sealife is set up:

1. In addition to a tripartite Executive Committee (Shipping Companies, Unions and Department of Trade), which steers and controls the work, a heavyweight body called the Sealife Council - also tripartite and including many of the top people in the industry, authorises the main course of the work and will make any decisions affecting the main policies of the industry arising from it.
2. The Fieldwork is carried out by a dozen or so people, both from inside and outside the industry, with knowledge of certain types of problems (e.g. ship design, organisation, personnel, team-building etc.). They work with seafarers either on experimental ships, or at shore conferences, and with shipping managements in shore offices. The work is at three main levels:
  - Industry-wide (e.g. recruitment practices)
  - Industry Sector - (e.g. special manpower problems in short sea trades)
  - Company and Ship (e.g. experimental work in particular companies).

3. The Programme will be financed by G.C.B.S. until 1980. By that time it will have cost about £1 million over 5 years.

4. Decisions to carry out projects can only be made by unanimous agreement within the Executive Committee, a non-voting body, which comprises 5 employer, 5 union and 1 D.O.T. representative.

It goes without saying that the small numbers of people directly involved are not themselves going to be able to improve the industry's manpower situation even less so in 5 years. Their task is to get good ideas for improvements tried out as a way of shifting basic attitudes about seafarers and their problems. If they succeed the hope is that the industry's own people will then accept the need to press through the fundamental longer-term changes. So Sealife should not raise any expectations of quick, easy answers - change will be sought through a process of consultation with and consent by all the interests involved - and that can take a long long time.

Here are a few illustrations of the types of question being examined:

1. Technology has affected most jobs on board. Does today's training and preparation for work at sea fit the actual jobs people find themselves having to do, quite apart from the qualifications it prepares them for. If not, how should it be improved?
2. Seafarers come from a shore society which has changed a lot too, in which seagoing is often seen

as a pretty inconvenient way of earning a crust.

Apart from pay and perks what can be done to make seafaring as a job more attractive and satisfying?

3. The standard organisation hierarchy on board has sound practical roots in the past - but ships and trading practices have changed a lot in recent years. Is there scope for different forms of organisation which better reflect the needs of particular ship types and trades, and those on board?
4. Despite record shore unemployment the industry is short of capable manpower. The usual entry age is low and basically only allows for two sorts of person - officers and non-officers. Is there a case for easing these self-imposed constraints and opening up the industry to a wider variety of entrants?
5. The MNE pool fills a valuable function for many companies and suits a lot of seafarers very well. Other seafarers and companies feel that the casual employment principle might be modified to suit those who would prefer more permanent relationships. This could place greater obligations on both employers and employees but might it not also help to lower manpower wastage by reducing insecurity?
6. Some shipping companies prefer to run a highly centralised operation with little real authority on board their ships. A few feel that this process has gone too far, and that only by giving the ship as much autonomy as possible can seafarers get sufficient stimulation and satisfaction from their jobs and so stay longer in the profession. How do you give the ship more autonomy (assuming those on board want it) in view of the major bearing this has on the shore organisation and people's jobs there?

7. When experts design anything for people to live and/or work in they have to make assumptions about these people. On some ships it almost seems that the designer assumed no-one on board could be more than 5' 10" tall or ever want to get through a hatchway in safety gear. These are simple but not unrealistic examples - others are much more subtle and infuriating. The important fact is that seafarers have insufficient real influence over the layouts and facilities they are confronted with and have to suffer (and sometimes enjoy) for prolonged periods. How can the quality of the ship's design be improved in favour of the seafarer, whilst still retaining practical efficiency?

The above questions form the themes of the work that is going on in Sealife. We have ship board experiments going on two ships, and half a dozen companies developing initial changes in their shore organisations to allow such transfers of authority in the future. We are assisting companies in getting information from their seafarers fed into the shipyard more effectively. We're sending our <sup>initial</sup> conclusions on the MN's recruitment and entry system to the Sealife Council, making the case for changes in central policies.

We are beginning to get involved in the problem of providing a real career structure for ratings which would attract and hold good men for longer. We hope to get some sort of pilot scheme going this year. We're holding workshops at which some of the real conflicts of interest between the employer and seafarer are brought into the open, and thoroughly examined.

Communication blockages are a factor in most organisations which have "people problems". They are very prevalent and inherently difficult to solve in this industry - so it is very important indeed that changes are really exhaustively evolved and thrashed out in discussions between ship and shore people.

If the industry is to survive we believe there have to be some major changes. We all resist change when it comes to the crunch - perhaps long tradition makes that especially true in shipping. We tend to be more resistant to change than some shore industries, but I am sure some of our problems are avoidable and see Sealife as a venture which does give the opportunity as never before of finding ways out of some of them. If you want to know more please let me know.