

Unions confront bizarre threat to U.S. merchant fleet

By Paul Doell
National President

American Maritime Officers, the Seafarers International Union, the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association and the International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots are taking on a peculiar threat to the privately owned and operated U.S.-flag merchant fleet in commercial deep-sea, Great Lakes and inland waters trades — the official response to reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, N.Y.

A survey submitted to Congress in January 2015 by the Manpower Data Center in the Department of Defense found “weighted” estimates that up to 28 women and up to 24 men “were sexually assaulted and an estimated 63 percent of women and 11 percent of men experienced sexual harassment” at Kings Point during the 2013-2014 academic year. This survey was required under a fiscal 2009 defense budget bill, and comparable analyses must be conducted every other year.

“These results are unsatisfactory to me, to the leadership of the academy, the Maritime Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation,” DOT Secretary Anthony Foxx said of the survey’s findings. “We will take every necessary measure to put a stop to this egregious behavior and to ensure that (Kings Point) midshipmen have a safe and supportive environment on campus and *during their Sea Year training.*”

‘Smokescreen strategy’

Our four unions agree completely with Secretary Foxx. Sexual assault, abuse and harassment in all its forms are unacceptable, whether at USMMA or at one or



all of the six state-operated academies. But we disagree completely with the Secretary and the smokescreen strategy DOT and MARAD have adopted to address this institutional crisis.

Last June, DOT and MARAD announced what they said would be a temporary suspension of Sea Year, the time when Kings Point midshipmen train at sea on U.S.-flag deep-sea, Great Lakes and inland waters cargo vessels. In July, this suspension was lifted — but only for vessels in the Military Sealift Command and MARAD fleets. At the Labor Day break, vessels operating in commercial markets — including ships participating in the Maritime Security Program — remained off limits to Kings Point midshipmen.

“Protecting the safety of the young women and men at the United States Merchant Marine Academy is our top priority at Department of Transportation,” DOT said in a policy update August 22. “Secretary Foxx directed the Sea Year stand-down in response to reported *incidents of bullying, coercion, sexual harassment and assault involving midshipmen during their time at sea.* DOT, the Maritime Administration and the USMMA have made consistent efforts to address these issues over the last few years, *but we have not solved the problem with inappropriate behavior during Sea Year,* and behavior issues that are affecting the campus culture. We are looking at additional *steps we can take to ensure the safety of our students at sea* and on campus, and also to promote a culture of transparency and respect for everyone.”

As you can glean from the added emphasis, DOT and MARAD contend that sexual misconduct and inappropriate behavior are common on U.S. merchant vessels providing commercial services in domestic waters and overseas.

An ‘offensive notion’

Are you insulted by the official assertion that sexual assault and harassment are preferred pastimes for American merchant mariners? Are you offended by

the notion that you as seagoing professionals can’t distinguish between right and wrong, and that you’re incapable of self-control and mutual respect? Are you troubled by the counterintuitive exemption from ugly imagery made by DOT and MARAD for private sector and civil service mariners on government vessels? You should be. But you should also be aware of the disturbing implications for your long-term job and benefit security.

The hasty, senseless DOT-MARAD strategy on this front could cause the loss of government shipping contracts awarded to commercial U.S. fleets through competitive bidding and the loss of licensed and unlicensed jobs in Military Sealift Command support services and in MARAD’s Ready Reserve Force sealift fleet.

This haphazard strategy could also cause young people at USMMA — and, in time, at the state maritime academies — to abandon their plans for careers at sea, which would in turn aggravate a persistent shortage of qualified officers and crews for defense shipping billets in national security emergencies.

In addition, the Kings Point scandal and the reckless DOT-MARAD response could cost our industry a lot of the broad, bipartisan Congressional support it has earned over many years on such matters as annual funding of the Maritime Security Program, defense of the Jones Act and cargo preference law enforcement. The U.S. merchant fleet has powerful, determined critics who smell blood here — and they could exploit an indefinite Sea Year stand-down to our lasting disadvantage.

AMO, the SIU, MEBA and the MM&P have no tolerance for illegal or inappropriate sexual behavior within our respective ranks. The unions’ records indicate few cases of assault, abuse or harassment over many years — with offenders punished appropriately each time. But we also have no tolerance for the scapegoating of American merchant mariners in what may be an attempt by DOT and MARAD to draw political and public attention from problems festering at the U.S. Merchant

Marine Academy they oversee.

“The American people entrust the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy with developing some of America’s best young men and women into leaders of exemplary character who proudly serve as officers in the U.S. merchant marine and our Armed Forces,” Secretary Foxx wrote in his comments on the Manpower Data Center survey report.

‘Standards of honor’

AMO, the SIU, MEBA and the MM&P share that trust in USMMA. But we also trust our seagoing memberships as responsible men and women, professionals who measure up to the standards of honor and “exemplary character” that have distinguished American merchant mariners in economic and defense service to the U.S. since the American Revolution.

Our four unions are circulating a collaborative position statement on this budding controversy. This statement is addressed to Secretary Foxx, but it’s making the rounds at MARAD and on Capitol Hill. The statement elaborates on points made here, and it urges two specific policy recommendations: the assignment of Kings Point midshipmen to commercial vessels within 60 days, and the addition of at least two commercial mariners — one Chief Engineer and one Captain, each with significant experience — to a panel of what DOT has called “independent outside experts” to “attempt to identify root causes and their impacts to the academy culture and offer possible short term and long term corrective actions to address the issues.”

We’ll make this statement available to all AMO members — a large Kings Point alumni bloc among them — through Currents, this publication, and the AMO website, and we’ll let you know the outcome.

Meanwhile, I welcome the input of AMO members everywhere on this or any other subject. I can be reached by phone at 954-921-2221, extension 1001, on my cell at 954-881-5651 or by email at pauldoell51@yahoo.com.