

AFL-CIO

LEGISLATIVE ALERT

October 12, 2017

Dear Senators,

Since Hurricane Maria swept across Puerto Rico, wiping out most of the island's infrastructure and causing immense human suffering, many have cited the Jones Act as an impediment to getting needed supplies to the island. For some, criticism of the Act is based on misinformation; for others it is based on the misguided view that the U.S. government should not play a role in ensuring that U.S. crews and ships are always available for military and humanitarian missions. On behalf of the AFL-CIO, I am writing to set the record straight.

Since 1789, the federal government has regulated coastal trade and, like many other maritime nations, has enacted laws to maintain a domestic maritime industry to ensure that we would not be dependent on foreign nations in times of war or natural disasters. The Jones Act, passed in 1920, accomplishes this goal by requiring that vessels carrying passengers and merchandise between U.S. ports must be U.S.-owned, U.S.-crewed and U.S.-built. Repealing the Jones Act would mean that neither U.S. ships nor crews would be available in national emergencies.

Since the Jones Act ensures that our labor laws protect maritime employees, repealing the Act would pave the way for foreign companies to replace domestic crews with lower paid workers lacking basic labor protections. According to the International Transport Workers Federation, foreign-flag ships often do not enforce safety standards, minimum social standards or trade union rights, fail to pay crews, and avoid compliance with environmental standards.

The Jones Act has in no way impeded Puerto Rico's recovery. Fully loaded Jones Act ships began arriving as soon as the main port in Puerto Rico re-opened. News footage of containers piling up at the Port of San Juan offered visual proof that life-saving supplies were arriving hourly on Jones Act ships, as well as on foreign ships not covered by the Jones Act. These supplies were not getting to interior sections of Puerto Rico because of transportation bottlenecks and a shortage of truck drivers, not because of a lack of ships.

Puerto Rico is a growing humanitarian crisis. The Island needs massive amounts of disaster relief - everything from water and food to medical supplies and fuel and rebuilding equipment - and organized labor is committed to the reconstruction effort. AFL-CIO unions represent 100,000 Puerto Rican residents, and union members have been involved in every phase of the recovery and rebuilding effort. We have contributed not only money, but also manpower. Over three hundred skilled union volunteers -- including doctors, nurses, electricians, and heavy equipment operators -- have traveled from the mainland to Puerto Rico to provide assistance.

While the distribution of lifesaving supplies is slowly improving, much of the transportation infrastructure on the island remains damaged by the storm. Repealing the Jones Act would not result in additional supplies getting to the Island, but it would jeopardize the survival of the U.S. maritime sector and along with it thousands of jobs that would be outsourced to foreign carriers.

What is needed now is for the U.S. military and FEMA to deploy all of their available resources to address the escalating humanitarian crisis. Our fellow citizens on Puerto Rico deserve no less.

Sincerely,



William Samuel, Director
Government Affairs Department

WS/TT/lkr

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