



JOINT PRESS RELEASE

European trade unions say only mandatory standards can rescue troubled ferries sector

24 July 2023, Brussels / London

A bilateral agreement was signed today in Paris between France and the United Kingdom over voluntary seafarer employment and welfare standards.

While the sentiment to improve outcomes for seafarers is being welcomed by European and international unions, the two governments are urged to get serious about creating and enforcing minimum rules to rescue the unstable ferries sector.

ETF General Secretary **Livia Spera** said: “This agreement is a step forward in the right direction. But we need mandatory standards and sectoral collective bargaining rights. The ETF is calling for the adoption of mandatory seafarer employment standards on European shipping routes, underpinned by sectoral collective bargaining rights, where they do not currently exist.”

“The solution proposed by France and the UK is based on a voluntary agreement by companies to follow the ‘rules.’ This is not enough, as it does not force companies to be compliant and it does not establish enforcement mechanisms.”

“What is more, this agreement will not unpick the effect of P&O Ferries’ attack on its own workforce in 2022, when the company unlawfully dismissed 800 seafarers and violated their rights.”

Spera warned that the UK-France bilateral agreement and the voluntary charter will be unable to prevent such cases from happening in the future.

She said it remained to be seen if P&O Ferries, Irish Ferries, crewing agents and other shipowners would decide to comply with what was agreed by the two countries.

“From our perspective, the focus needs to be on eradicating substandard working conditions and re-establishing decent standards and rights through legislation and collective bargaining.”

Irish Ferries, P&O still driving a race to the bottom

International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) General Secretary **Stephen Cotton** joined his European counterpart in calling for mandatory standards to be applied to all companies operating ferries in the English Channel, Irish and North Sea.

“We need to see strong laws supporting decent wages and conditions. And when laws are broken, we need to see swift enforcement and prosecutorial action taken by states,” he said.

Cotton said the voluntary charter would not stop the sector’s slide into another round of cost-cutting and wage-slashing because some companies had made it their strategy to ignore community standards and even break the law.

The public would be wondering why the likes of Irish Ferries and P&O Ferries were still permitted to operate despite not paying UK or French national minimum wages, undercutting their competitors who chose to do the right thing.

“We need to see a response from P&O Ferries and Irish Ferries to this initiative,” Cotton said. “How these rogue companies respond to today’s news will tell us a lot about whether voluntary charters are really going to be enough to stop the bad behaviour we’ve seen in recent years.”