

Communiqué de presse
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The French « RIF » a FOC !?
But what happens to ITF ?

The « Institut Français de la Mer » (IFM - French Institute of the sea) closely followed, as an observer only, the debates and discussions leading to the new French international registry, the so-called RIF.

But it is as a prominent actor of the French maritime life that it wants to react and comment the recent decision as made by the ITF (the major international seafarers' union) to declare the RIF "a FOC", i.e. a flag of convenience.

Indeed the Fair Practices Committee, the reputation of which is generally appreciated, just made a decision, which one cannot but qualify, as inappropriate, unjustified and unfair. Such a decision would just deserve to be ignored if it were not putting the blame and shame on the French flagged fleet, the French shipowners, and last but not least the French seafarers, whether ratings or officers.

The ITF made this decision together with the [same] one concerning the Georgian and the North-Korean flags, adding that the latter are "among the worst combining age, decrepitude and near zero protection for those working on them".

One cannot but regret such an extreme use of the « amalgamation technics » leading to such an unfair assimilation and judgement:

1. A very unusually and strangely quick judgement indeed (8 days after the law passed at the Parliament. Such an emergency had never been seen before !):

And how evaluate the lack of quality of the « Riffed » vessels whilst the new registry is not even open as yet? And whilst it took so many years of experts to settle the condition of the Georgian and North-Korean flags, although same had been very well known for years.

And what became the usual honest spirit of the ITF? its usual respect of and consideration for the "habeas corpus"?

2. A judgement which is contrary to the (good) principles of the ITF itself:

Indeed their main criterion for classifying some flags in the FOC category is the fact that the country of flag differs from the country of ownership (the so-called "genuine link" criteria).

Then the ITF usually (and rightfully) checks the other following additional criteria:

- Minimal social levels/norms onboard the concerned ships (remuneration but also human and union rights etc)
- Full respect of the ratified ILO rules and norms.
- Full respect of the IMO rules and norms (safety, security, environment...)

The truth is that all these criteria (and far beyond and above!) are respected by the next RIF registry.

a) Re the first main criteria there is no problem whatsoever, since the shipowner generally has to be established in France, obviously sub respecting the EU rules as is the case for all other European registers. Still only the RIF and the GIS (Germany) are condemned by ITF. Why these two? Or why these two only?

b) As far as the social levels and norms are concerned, there is no other bona-fide way than recognising that the RIF, far from being complacent (convenient) in any manner, does guarantee a really best practice, notably for the non-European part of the crews. In this respect the RIF is a world “premiere”, making it the most socially protective of all European international registries

c) Re the ILO, it happens that France is the best! It is the great maritime country, which ratified the most numerous ILO conventions. And it is France with its three concerned bodies working together and united (State, Unions, Shipowners) which contributed the most, especially in Geneva last year, to the writing of the very next maritime consolidated ILO convention.

d) Re the IMO rules, it is France who initiated the PSC with the MOU of Paris, whereas both the Paris and Tokyo memoranda confirm that all the flags on their black lists are real convenience flags (whereas all the ones on their white lists are indeed quality/reliable flags). And France is in both cases at the forefront of the concerned white lists!

And furthermore (above all), how does ITF dare understate that the French Administration of « Affaires maritimes » is or would be or could be complacent, whilst France is amongst the top-quality countries, and is one of the very few States where flag controls are fully rigorous and transparent (this is offending/insulting).

3. A judgement which is counterproductive for the future of a technically safer and a socially advanced merchant marine:

Indeed such an attack cannot but lead to encourage behaviour and attitudes far from, if not opposed to, quality.

One example? The « Fair Practices Committee » of ITF, the work of which is based on excellent and necessary principles (struggle/fight against all these types of works which might be « unsafe », and/or « unprotected », and/or « insecure », and/or « unpaid » or « undervalued ») never really studied the wages of the Chinese seafarers onboard the Chinese vessels calling in European ports. Would it mean the refusal, by the ITF, to even contemplate the idea of putting China on the FOC list in case it would « deserve » it? Whilst that same

Committee did condemn, obviously with “eyes wide shut”, the quite higher RIF remuneration (despite being at least equivalent to the ones which are recommended by ITF itself).

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The Institut Français de la Mer has always been at the forefront of the fight for quality at sea. Knowing that such quality is based on the respect – at least, and far more! – of the international IMO and ILO, the IFM cannot be satisfied with either approximate, vague statements norms and/or strong but totally unjustified judgements. This is the reason why it firmly refuses and condemns this incredible/unacceptable ITF decision to put the RIF on the FOC list whilst objectively, clearly, undoubtedly the characteristics of this new registry do not justify it.

Besides, one is fully entitled to question who is benefiting from such an ITF decision. Indeed the only guaranteed result of same is to put a big harm on the national French flag, a big threat on the potential employment of national seafarers, and doubts on our merchant marine national schools. Whilst on the contrary, in a country like Denmark - indeed less “mediatically” exposed than France - and whose maritime future was questionable still a few years ago, the creation of the DIS (very much the same type as the RIF) did boost again the national maritime industry: 165 ships on order by early 2005, 15 200 sailors (out of which 12 000 Europeans, out of which 10 000 Danes).

Hence the Institut Français de la Mer requests the ITF:

- to have a really fair look at the actual French practice and at the RIF. The IFM indeed fears any unjustified « political » behaviour which would finally be a threat on ITF’s credibility and reliability. It is the maritime world, which has everything to loose if the great quality actors deny their own “ethic” duties.

- not to miss the really important fight. It is indeed another duty, for all quality actors, to assist the third-world countries to escape from their underdevelopment situation. Condemn Georgia okay! But it is just as important to help this young nation which just emerged as such. Similarly it is urgent to restore a real dialogue between the Northern and Southern hemispheres and the international “technical co-operation” which is the only realistic not too costly solution. The IFM, who already initiated the fight into that direction, is fully prepared to work with ITF on this so important challenge.