



Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO

TTD Stands in Solidarity with Washington State Ferry Engineers and Oilers

The Washington State Ferry System (WSF) is, indisputably, in crisis. After many years of underinvestment by the state, this vital network of marine highways is hindered by a shortage of vessels, a \$270 million deferred maintenance backlog, and, most importantly, a severe staffing crisis. Tens of thousands of Washingtonians rely on state-operated ferry service to commute to work daily, and tens of thousands more rely on the service to attend medical appointments, go to school, transport essential goods, or connect with friends and family. For decades, WSF has provided the backbone for an economy and community to thrive throughout the difficult geography of Puget Sound and the San Juan islands. An iconic system is now at a clear breaking point.

Last year, about 3,500 trips across the system were canceled, with a clear majority of cancellations caused by failure to meet Coast Guard-mandated crew minimums. As it stands now, the system relies heavily on crew members' willingness and availability to work overtime, sometimes as much as 100 overtime hours per month per individual. Across the system, engineers, oilers, and wipers worked a total of 81,000 overtime hours last year. Unfortunately, as dedicated as this workforce is to keeping vessels running, there are simply not enough workers and not enough overtime hours in a day to keep WSF reliably running all routes. Even worse, the state faces a troublesome horizon in the near term: about half of the system's chief engineers will be eligible for retirement in the next three years. This crisis is the culmination of many years of underpaying mariners.

Put into the context of the global maritime industry, which is already experiencing an estimated shortfall of 21,000 mariners and significant demand for these highly skilled professionals, there is not much to attract experienced workers to the WSF system. The compensation offered by the state, and mandated by the most recent arbitration decision, falls stunningly short of the wages and benefits of comparable jobs in the broader maritime industry. For example, chief engineers in the private sector earn about \$300,000 for half a year's work while WSF's chief engineers earn about \$150,000 to work year-round, with the added pressure of extreme overtime needs to keep the ferries running. Not to mention, as WSF transitions its ferry fleet toward electrification and hybridization, Washington state must recognize the need to adequately compensate highly qualified marine engineers who will be at the forefront of workforce training and ferry operations. While TTD applauds the much-deserved recent increase in wages for WSF's above-deck crew, this has resulted in a 20 percent wage gap between the above-deck crew and engine crew – an inexplicable disparity in light of the comparable training and respective skills necessary to operate the ferries safely. Considering that the above-deck and engine crews are mutually dependent on one another for safe and reliable operations, WSF's tolerance of a 20 percent wage gap between departments does the system no favors. The state's interest-arbitration proceedings' preservation of this disparity will continue to fail to attract much-needed qualified workers to the WSF system. In certain positions, trained, credentialed, and experienced ferry workers earn a lower hourly wage than workers in other positions that do not require years of combined education and experience. Despite WSF's status as the country's largest ferry system with a rich history of reliable service, fair compensation – the cornerstone of any effective operation – has fallen from some of the highest paying ferry jobs in the country to some of the lowest.

As public sector workers in the state of Washington, ferry workers' bargaining power has been severely curtailed by the lack of a legal right to strike. The market distortion caused by workers' inability to leverage their own collective power, combined with the state's decades-long neglect of the ferry system's challenges, has directly contributed to the staffing crisis at hand. The pay disparities for below-deck crew exacerbate this crisis. While the workers are bound to the contract decided by the arbitration process, state leadership is not.

The Washington State Ferries system carries tens of millions of people every year. The system regularly moves billions of dollars in maritime commerce around the Puget Sound region and is a vital transportation link for the State of Washington. The TTD Executive Committee calls on Washington's elected leaders to right the ship by offering competitive compensation for all of its skilled mariners as well as addressing the laws surrounding collective bargaining rights, and processes within the public sector of the state, including restoring the employee's right to strike if need be. Addressing the collective bargaining process for all union-represented employees. Such actions will lead to a system where competitive wages and benefits will attract and retain the highly skilled mariners needed to reach full staffing levels, replace the growing deluge of retiring staff, and return the system to the reliable service levels that Washington residents need to prosper.

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