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EDITORIAL

IT'S DECISION TIME

The good news first, and it has been long-awaited. Last month the Minister for Transport Safety, the Hon Harry Duynhoven, signed off the new inshore deckhand qualification certificated deckhand. This qualification, along with the work record and task book, which will be available through the New Zealand Marine Transport Association, now gives an entry-level for school leavers to enter the restricted limits shipping industry.

All too often in the past the opportunities for a young person to enter the industry was blocked by age or manning skills requirements. Now a new entrant can study for the unit standard equivalent to Boatmaster while still at high school, and this unit standard is credited in the task book.

Once the task book is completed, the trainee gets a reduction in sea time required as a bonus for completing a structured, on-the-job training programme.

This is good news and it comes just in time, because if vessel owners do not start taking on new trainees now and get them trained we will shortly run out of good, skilled skippers and crew to man our vessels.

This is a responsibility for all vessel owners and not just the big companies. Gone are the days when one could poach crew off the big companies who spent the time and effort to train their staff.

This brings me on to the next issue, the question of a master's pay and what we pay them. It would be fair to say that the larger ferry and workboat companies have kept the professional seafarer's wages artificially low for too long.

Granted, differing skills and experience should command a difference in pay structure, but what really amazes me is that we can have a master operating a multi-million dollar high-speed ferry on New Zealand's busiest waterways with over 350 passengers down the back in all manner of weather and conditions.

Or it could be a large tourist vessel operating within our beautiful sounds, or a tug towing a 3000 tonne barge crossing a West Coast bar, and we pay him or her in most cases less than \$25 an hour. A chippie earns more than that, and when you look at plumbers and electricians the rates are considerably higher.

I have kept away from airline pilots, but I have to say that I see a synergy between pilots and many of our skilled masters in

regards to responsibilities of duty and safety of lives, and yet we fail to give due recognition. The only way we have survived until now is that the old hands have stayed on because they have no other option, or out of blind loyalty to the industry and their employers.

But these fellows are ageing fast, and we do not have the young ones following. Why? You might ask. It would appear that the romance of the sea is not as attractive to today's youngsters as it might have been to a lot of us so many years ago. The money is poor and working conditions are much harder. It's shift work, watchkeeping and tiring. Why go to sea when there are many more attractive offers available that will not put a half hitch around my sport or social life.

As an industry we need to face up to these facts. Our ageing masters and engineers will be retiring all too soon, and unless we up the anti and offer far better pay rates and conditions we will be left squabbling over the best of the waterfront derelicts.

We have to start planning now, and start thinking about pay scales. If you are on subsidised services the local authorities need to be told. Start thinking \$35 to \$40 an hour for your good masters. Offer a parity of pay, or this industry will not be attracting the career sailors of the future, and in five years the problem will be at crisis point.

We have one chance to turn it around, and to do this we must attract the school leavers and then make our pay scales attractive enough for them to want a career at sea. The solution is in our hands.

Back onto a more positive note. We are seeing a steady flow of new vessels entering service around our coast. The industry is facing tough times, with high fuel costs, and a lack of certainty in local government and councils over our continued right of access to the foreshore and wharf structures, as many operators are being squeezed off the waterfront in preference to higher returns from apartments and condos.

And yet our participants remain committed to a vibrant maritime industry, something all New Zealand should be proud of. In this issue we bring the latest in news and views, and a look at what is happening around the coast.

Keith Ingram, Editor