

## Trump move threatens Mass. maritime economy

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The Trump Administration is trying to circumvent an almost century-old law that protects our national security, creates well-paying, blue-collar jobs, and ensures safe working conditions for merchant mariners. This is being done without congressional approval and with little public knowledge. It is the latest example of the president who promised to put “America First” siding with multinational corporations against American workers.

The law in question is the Jones Act, passed in 1920. It requires that shipping between two American ports is conducted by vessels built in the United States, owned by American companies, and crewed by at least 75 percent American citizens or permanent residents. It has been amended repeatedly, most recently in 2006, to address changing maritime shipping conditions.

While it is hardly a hot-button political issue, the Jones Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation for protecting American jobs and ensuring our merchant mariners are treated fairly by their employers. Unsurprisingly, repealing the law has long been a goal of right-wing organizations like the [Cato Institute](#), [Heritage Foundation](#), and [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#).

Repeal attempts have gone nowhere in Congress, but the White House is doing an end-run around Congress to weaken the Jones Act. On October 23, US Customs and Border Protection, the agency responsible for enforcing the Jones Act, posted a draft regulation that would create a huge loophole. If this new regulation goes into effect, any ship carrying equipment for offshore wind farms, oil wells, or natural gas platforms would be exempt from the Jones Act. It is a massive expansion of a decades-old exemption for ships carrying equipment for use on other ships.

The most direct way to block this action is congressional action. The Massachusetts congressional delegation should take the lead in codifying the Jones Act in statute to prevent the administration from circumventing the law’s intent and putting sailors out of work.

This assault on the Jones Act means that energy-related shipping will be done almost entirely by foreign-built, foreign-flagged, and foreign-crewed vessels. American sailors will lose jobs while massive, multinational corporations will make even greater profits. The industries impacted by this change are dominated by large companies that can easily afford to comply with the Jones Act.

For example, Equinor was recently awarded one of the wind energy leases off the Massachusetts coast. In 2017, Equinor was valued at over \$32 billion. Another lease is owned by Mayflower Wind Energy, a joint venture between a Spanish company and Shell Oil, one of the largest corporations in the world. The last thing these corporations need is a de facto shipping subsidy at the expense of hardworking American sailors.

One of the most important parts of the Jones Act is the safe conditions it mandates on board merchant vessels. Without these protections, sailors suffer. Despite international treaties and conventions regulating merchant shipping, many foreign-flagged vessels are floating sweatshops, where vulnerable sailors from developing countries labor in unsafe conditions for pitiful wages. In one infamous example, sailors on a Chinese-owned ship were paid \$300 a month and denied medical care. Just this year, a Panamanian ship was banned from Australia because of what investigators called “modern-day slave labor,” which included the withholding of pay. Our government should be doing everything in its power to stop these abuses, not inviting the perpetrators into our waters.

Massachusetts residents and communities will be disproportionately harmed by the Trump administration’s proposed Jones Act loophole. As a coastal state, commercial shipping is a significant part of our economy. There are currently 1,700 students at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, one of only nine public maritime colleges in the country. While not every student will work as a merchant mariner, reducing the number of available jobs in the field will be a major blow to those students and their future.

Additionally, weakening the Jones Act harms America’s national security. It is essential that our nation has a thriving Merchant Marine ready to support our armed forces during a military conflict. This was one of the major reasons for passing the Jones Act in the first place. World War I exposed the deficiencies in our Merchant Marine, and Congress wanted to ensure we were prepared for the next major conflict. When America entered World War II, we had a thriving maritime shipping fleet that supported our military in the Pacific and in Europe.

Merchant shipping is still a vital national security need almost a century later. Between 2001 and 2011, ships drawn from the merchant marine transported over 51 million tons of military cargo to Afghanistan and Iraq. It is outrageous that the Trump administration wants to weaken this vital part of our national defense to make billion-dollar corporations more profitable.

Despite Trump’s rhetoric about the forgotten man and “America First” policies, his administration is harming blue-collar jobs and jeopardizing a national security asset just so enormous companies can make even more money. This attempt to weaken the Jones Act is a microcosm of his entire administration, where populist rhetoric covers up giveaways to multinational corporations.

Congress should not let it happen.