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Bryan Being Slammed by Coalition of Maritime Heavyweights For Signing MOU to Make USVI First International Open Registry in U.S.

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Eight organizations representing workers in the maritime industry on the mainland United States are criticizing the decision by Governor Albert Bryan to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Northeast Maritime Institute to implement a maritime initiative that will make the U.S. Virgin Islands the first international open ship registry in the United States.

“On behalf of the licensed and unlicensed American merchant mariners who have proudly and without fail served our country since its founding, we oppose in the strongest possible terms the creation of an open registry in the Virgin Islands, a territory of the United States,” said a news release from Lisa Rosenthal, communications director of International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots.

The grouping says that “Open registries exist so that shipowners can increase their profits by avoiding the same rules, regulations, tax obligations, and manning requirements that attach to a national flag fleet. This latest effort is nothing more than an exercise in labor arbitrage designed to generate registry fees and to enrich foreign shipowners at the expense of American workers and America’s national interests.”

In the news release, which is dated February 1, the eight organizations which represent a broad coalition of the labor movement, said, “The proposed U.S. Virgin Islands flag of convenience open registry will not benefit the United States nor America’s maritime industry, any more than any other second or open registry benefits a national flag country.”

Elaborating further, it said, “In fact, the establishment and growth of second registries by other industrialized nations has done little more than decimating their national flag fleets to the point that they are no longer able to provide the requisite military security and logistical support to their flag nations.”

The coalition said that at its core, the proposal, which is allowing for the operation of vessels with foreign mariners under a United States open registry, “is an affront to the American mariners who have always put themselves in harm’s way whenever called upon by our nation.”

“Their service, most recently recognized by Congress with the awarding of a Congressional Gold Medal to World War II American merchant mariners, demonstrates a clear and unwavering commitment on the part of American merchant mariners to supply and support American troops deployed around the world, with no regard for their own safety.

“American mariners believe that our servicemen and women and their families deserve no less. The military security of the United States will not be strengthened by relying on foreign-owned and foreign crewed vessels,” said the release which points out that such a move could jeopardize American troops deployed overseas.

“The safety of American troops deployed overseas and the success of their mission must not be put in jeopardy by a reliance on a flag of convenience open registry scheme that utilizes foreign crewed vessels to deliver what our servicemen and women need to do their job in our behalf,” said the release.

“We call upon the Department of Defense, the Maritime Administration, the Biden Administration, and the Congress to reject any suggestion that the United States Virgin Islands-flag vessels be treated as if they are U.S.-flag and U.S.-crewed vessels for any purpose or for any program.

“At the same time, we reiterate our commitment to work with the Administration and Congress to achieve a more robust, commercially viable U.S.-flag, U.S.-crewed fleet that will continue to protect America’s economic, military and homeland security,” said the release which is signed by David Connolly, president of Sailors Union of the Pacific; Paul Doell, president of American Maritime Officers; Daniel Duncan, secretary-treasurer of Maritime Trades Department, AFL-CIO; Don Marcus, president of International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots; Anthony Poplawski, president of Marine Firemen’s Union; Greg Regan, president of Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO; Michael Sacco, president of Seafarers International Union, and Adam Vokac, president of Marine Engineers’ Beneficial Association.

The Bryan administration earlier this week issued a news release that lauded the agreement and said the MOU, signed with the Northeast Maritime Institute and titled the “Revitalization Plan for

U.S. Maritime Trade, Commerce and Strategic Competition,” is designed to provide economic stability and environmental protection, as well as to revitalize the position of the United States as a major competitor in international maritime trade and commerce, while enhancing national security, both domestically and internationally. Northeast Maritime Institute is a private, coeducational maritime college that offers degrees in Maritime Science.

“Because the territory is fully exempt from the Jones Act, which requires that the majority of crew members on ships passing between U.S. ports be American and sets forth other regulations, it is uniquely positioned to be an international open registry port,” said the release from the Office of the Governor.

In addition to creating an international open registry in the USVI, the Revitalization Plan includes a number of initiatives. These are:

- Developing a short sea transshipment hub in the Caribbean to alleviate supply chain congestion by moving a portion of east coast distribution from land to sea and increasing the number of ports importing goods from overseas.
- Building public/private/international partnerships to address strategic maritime issues, increase transparency and enforce legal and ethical standards.
- Establishing and implementing a green shipping strategy, including decarbonization of the U.S.-flagged fleet.
- Establishing a Maritime Venture Capital Fund to finance commercially advanced technologies that solve maritime and ocean industry problems with a focus on environmental vulnerabilities.
- Modernizing the maritime workforce by deploying state-of-the-art education and training tools in the US and abroad.

“This is a partnership with local, national, and global implications that will increase the strategic importance of the Virgin Islands to the country’s maritime industry,” Governor Bryan said before Tuesday’s signing ceremony in the nation’s capital, according to Gov’t House. “In addition to the economic boost and jobs it will bring to the Territory, it gives the United States a commercially strategic ship registry in the Caribbean and will enhance and boost the global supply chain.”