Pay a Fair Share: The Cruise Industry’s Failed Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Mr. Arnold Donald, Mr. Richard D. Fain, and Mr. Frank J. Del Rio,

As the CEOs of cruise industry giants Carnival Corporation & PLC, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., and Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd., your companies collectively account for over 70% of the global cruise market share and generated over $6 billion U.S. dollars in profits last year. At the start of 2020, it seemed to be fair seas and smooth sailings for your companies, as bookings and profits were expected to continue to increase.

Yet, the new coronavirus had other plans. The world looked on in horror as your ships were refused port entries, passengers were quarantined in their rooms for weeks while the virus spread like wildfire, and dozens of people ultimately lost their lives to the COVID-19 virus they contracted on board your vessels. You inexplicably chose to continue sailing — putting the health of your passengers, your crew members, and the world at significant risk.

As of mid-May, over 100,000 of your crew members were stuck on board your ships, many of them for weeks and months. It’s not clear how many currently remain. Some have reached such a deep level of hopelessness and despair that they have taken their own lives. Others have attempted to, but thankfully were rescued before they were able.

The solution is simple: your companies must arrange and pay for the immediate repatriation of your staff in a way that does not further endanger public health. This may be expensive. But the costs are astronomically higher because you choose to hire much of your staff from far away, developing nations and pay them shockingly low wages, in order to maximize profits. The consequences of that practice have come full circle, and it is time to stop and get them homes before more lives are lost.

Those of us who have watched the cruise industry closely for years were sadly not surprised when Carnival, Norwegian, and Royal Caribbean failed to respond proactively to the unfolding pandemic by ceasing to sail, even after the Diamond Princess made clear that your vessels posed a significant risk to public health and passenger safety. The failure of your companies to respond immediately and appropriately to the scale of the unfolding pandemic had another unforeseen consequence. It dragged your industry into the harsh light of public scrutiny, and many are shocked by the ugly truths they’re seeing for the first time.

You choose to incorporate your companies in foreign countries and register your vessels overseas, in order to avoid paying taxes on almost all of your profits, as well as to sidestep U.S. environmental and labor laws. You choose to fuel the vast majority of your vessels with one of the dirtiest fossil fuels on Earth — heavy fuel oil, which is a dirt-cheap, bottom-of-the-barrel sludge waste left over from oil refineries — even though cleaner fuels are available. You choose to install “emissions cheat” scrubber systems to get around stricter fuel-quality standards, which effectively convert air pollution into water pollution — a threat so significant that the science advisory body to the United Nations International Maritime Organization noted in its report that these systems may violate international laws prohibiting the conversion of one type of pollution into another.

You claim that you are reducing your climate pollution but further endanger public health. This may be expensive. But the costs are astronomically higher because you choose to hire much of your staff from far away, developing nations and pay them shockingly low wages, in order to maximize profits. The consequences of that practice have come full circle, and it is time to stop and get them homes before more lives are lost.

You companies have collectively been caught illegally dumping oily waste, poorly and untreated sewage, and plastics; tampering with pollution monitoring equipment; lying to regulators; and falsifying documents to conceal gross environmental lawbreaking.

And now, it’s all on display: cruise giants like yourselves maximize profits at the expense of people and our planet. It is unsurprising that lawmakers, community members, and investors are recoiling from what they see.

If and when your cruise ships sail again, a return to pollution as usual is not an option. Rebuilding public trust in your brands and the cruise industry will require complete public transparency, substantive climate commitments, and the rapid implementation of a massive overhaul of the way you do business.

At minimum, that means immediately switching to the cleanest fuels available, ending all further investments in climate-super-pollutant liquefied natural gas (LNG), implementing working standards onboard your vessels equal to those applicable to U.S. employees, immediately repatriating all workers stuck on board your vessels, and ending all dumping of poorly and untreated waste, plastics, and oil into our oceans.

Tomorrow, on World Oceans Day, we will be joined in an online rally by community members from ports around the world, for a Global Day of Action to Clean Up Cruising. Many of these communities have for years been pushing for changes in the cruise sector, in order to protect their health, their environment, and their livelihoods. It is past time that you listen. It’s time to act.

Sincerely,

Kendra Ulrich
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Shipping Campaigns Director

Marcia Keever
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Mr. Frank J. Del Rio, President/CEO
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—Other dumping: