

(SIU News Release 022023v4)

For Immediate Release
February 14, 2023

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SIU President Michael Sacco Retires

Union's Executive Board Unanimously Approves David Heindel as Successor

Michael Sacco, the longest-serving president in Seafarers International Union history, has retired.

"I am in good health and good spirits," he stated. "But I have often heard that you simply know when it's time to retire, and this is the time."

Sacco, 86, formalized his plan Feb. 13 during a meeting of the SIU Executive Board near Orlando, Florida. During that same gathering, the board unanimously approved the nomination of SIU Secretary-Treasurer David Heindel to become the union's fourth president, effective Feb. 14.

Subsequently, the board unanimously approved the respective appointments of Tom Orzechowski as secretary-treasurer and Bryan Powell as vice president of the SIU's Great Lakes and Inland Waters sector. Orzechowski had served as Lakes vice president since 2003; Powell had been an assistant vice president since 2007.

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said, "Mike Sacco's distinguished career in trade unionism is an inspiration to all of us. Mike's leadership at the Seafarers International Union benefited generations of merchant mariners and all working people. Mike led his union with integrity and a fighting spirit that he learned as a rank-and-file member. It's been an honor to have him serve on the AFL-CIO Executive Council for more than three decades, always quick to offer sage advice and guidance about the future of our movement. We wish Mike nothing but the best in retirement and know he'll always be ready to take up any fight that boosts working people."

Heindel, 65, described Sacco as "an inspiration to members and officials alike. Under Mike's leadership, the SIU has become a respected powerhouse in maritime circles around the globe. We've been together since I was a trainee back in the early 1970s, and I know Mike has dedicated his whole life to the SIU. We all owe him a debt of gratitude."

Heindel added, "On behalf of the entire organization, I also thank Mike's family, and in particular his wife, Sophie, for their sacrifices and support of his time that was required to foster the SIU's growth. It has been great working with Mike over the years. And while he may be dropping an anchor, he has agreed to continue to be an advisor as President Emeritus. Here's to a well-deserved and happy retirement, Chief!"

Sacco served as president of the SIU's Atlantic, Gulf, Lakes and Inland Waters (AGLIW) for nearly 35 years, beginning in June 1988. In November 1991, at its 19th Biennial Constitutional

Convention, Sacco was elected a vice president of the AFL-CIO, the federation of 60 national and international unions representing more than 14 million workers in the United States. He eventually became the senior vice president of the AFL-CIO Executive Council as its longest-serving member.

A protege of the late SIU President Paul Hall, Sacco from 1980 to 1988 directed the SIU AGLIW's Great Lakes and Inland Waters division as vice president. He also was vice president of the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship from 1968 to 1979. The school, located on the grounds of the Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education in Piney Point, Maryland, prepares men and women for a career aboard U.S.-flag commercial vessels and provides upgrading opportunities to active members.

A Brooklyn native and U.S. Air Force veteran, he joined the SIU in 1958 and shipped aboard U.S.-flag merchant vessels until he came ashore during the 1960s to serve the SIU in a succession of union posts, including those of patrolman, port agent and headquarters representative.

Heindel began his career with the SIU in 1973, when he graduated from the trainee program in Piney Point. He primarily sailed aboard deep-sea vessels as a member of the engine department before coming ashore in 1980 to work as a patrolman in his native New Orleans.

Among the other jobs he has held with the union are patrolman at the SIU halls in Philadelphia and Baltimore, port agent at the Philadelphia hall, and assistant vice president of the SIU's Gulf Coast region. Heindel also formerly served as a vice president of the Pennsylvania State AFL-CIO and the Philadelphia Central Labor Council. He became secretary-treasurer of the SIU in 1997.

In August 2002, he was elected vice chairman of the International Transport Workers' Federation's (ITF's) Seafarers' Section. Since then, he extensively has worked – both domestically and as part of U.S. delegations in international forums – with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the International Labor Organization and the International Maritime Organization on shipboard and port-security issues as well as the international project for a new Seafarers Identity Document. He helped protect mariners' rights under the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (which took effect July 2004), and he helped secure a new agreement for tens of thousands of mariners worldwide under the ITF's International Bargaining Forum.

During the ITF Congress in August 2006, he was elected to a four-year term as first vice chair of the Seafarers' Section. At the ITF Congress in August 2010, he was elected chair of the ITF's Seafarers' Section, thereby becoming only the second American ever to hold that post. He was re-elected at the ITF Congress in August 2014, then re-elected again in October 2018.

“Dave will do a great job and he has my complete confidence,” Sacco stated. “He has proven himself throughout his lifetime of service to the SIU. We are also fortunate to have outstanding leadership throughout our executive board, and I know this will be a seamless transition.”

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