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Union Mourns Passing of Michael Sacco

Seafarers International Union President Emeritus Michael Sacco died Dec. 28 in St. Louis, surrounded by family members. He was 86 years old and passed away from natural causes.

Mike was the longest-serving president in SIU history, having led the organization from 1988 until his retirement in February 2023 (a period spanning nearly 35 years).

Reaction to his death consisted of a massive outpouring of respect, appreciation, and affection. Among those offering condolences: President Biden; Elaine Chao, a cabinet secretary in two different U.S. presidential administrations (she attended the funeral mass); top officials from the AFL-CIO and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF); rank-and-file Seafarers and SIU pensioners; leaders of other U.S. unions; SIU Executive Board members; American maritime industry business executives; U.S. military and government officials; and many, many others.

Giving one of the eulogies at Mike's funeral mass (he was a devout Catholic), which took place Jan. 6 in St. Louis, SIU President David Heindel stated, "Mike was an inspiration to so many people, and not just people from his union. He had that same effect on military officers, government officials, corporate executives and many others. He was one-in-a-million, and he had a way of making you believe you could accomplish anything if you set your mind to it. Make no mistake, he will be remembered as one of the most significant, influential and accomplished maritime labor leaders in our nation's history. I truly do not know if the U.S. Merchant Marine would still exist if it weren't for Mike."

Mike served as president of the SIU's Atlantic, Gulf, Lakes and Inland Waters (AGLIW) beginning in June 1988. He also worked as president of both the Seafarers International Union of North America (a federation of autonomous unions that includes the SIU AGLIW) and the Maritime Trades Department (MTD) throughout the same period.

Moreover, in November 1991, at its 19th Biennial Constitutional Convention, Mike 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. Based in St. Louis, he served as secretary-treasurer of the Greater St. Louis Area and Vicinity Port Council (an MTD-chartered organization) and as an executive board member of the Missouri State AFL-CIO.

Mike 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.

He became associated with 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.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Mike served in the U.S. Air Force from 1954 to 1958.

Although his accomplishments as an SIU official are too numerous to list, highlights included fostering the successful merger of the National Maritime Union into the SIU in 2001; helping secure the implementation of the U.S. Maritime Security Program (MSP), a staple of the industry; insisting that the Paul Hall Center constantly improved; unifying the industry during critical political battles; and individually encouraging every Seafarer, SIU official and staff member he ever met.

Fittingly, Fr. Sinclair Oubre, an SIU member and Catholic priest, helped officiate Mike's memorial service. He also gave a brief eulogy, as did Mike's son John, the latter on behalf of the whole family.



Top photo was taken early last year in Florida, where Mike had announced his retirement. From left are Executive Board members Nicholas Celona, David Heindel, Karen Horton-Genette, Nick Marrone, Tom Orzechowski, Bryan Powell, Mike Sacco, George Tricker, Dean Corgey, Joseph Soresi and Augie Tellez. Mike's official photo is at right.

In addition to John, survivor's include Mike's wife, Sophie; daughters Valerie Moore, Angela Baker, and Anne Marie Fry; 16 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren; and sisters Ida DiCanio and Marie Sacco.

"Mike was a force for fairness and decency," President Biden noted. "While he was a kind and compassionate man, Mike never backed down from a fight when it came to protecting the rights of his fellow merchant mariners and workers everywhere. Our country is stronger and our economy is fairer because of his leadership and devotion. I know his legacy will endure through all the lives he touched."

In a joint statement, AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler and AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Fred Redmond said, "His big personality and even bigger heart were relentless in ensuring that working people had a seat at the table in every boardroom and that their voices were heard in every hall of power. Nobody fought harder for our nation's rank-and-file working people than our Mike. Mike Sacco was a trusted mentor and leader to his members, a dear friend of the AFL-CIO and an inspiration to the entire labor movement. While our hearts break today for this loss, the legacy of Mike's service to the SIU and trade unionism will live on forever."

SIU Vice President Government Services Nicholas Celona knew Mike for 47 years. "He was my union ed teacher in Piney Point in 1977, and I worked with him and his brother Joey (late SIU executive vice president) in the Gulf region," Celona recalled. "He was an inspiration and a driving force in my career, and a teacher in how to promote and protect the SIU and the entire United States Merchant Marine, along with the American labor movement. I will miss him a lot."

SIU Executive Vice President Augie Tellez also knew Mike for decades – in his case, since 1975. "He influenced my life right up to the present," Tellez said. "He was a force of nature. People who are larger than life cast a big shadow that touches many people, and that is Mike's legacy. Think of the thousands of Seafarers and their families who have a better life because of him. Mike always tried to emphasize the positive, and he cared about everybody's family. I learned a lifetime's worth of lessons from him."



SIU Secretary-Treasurer Tom Orzechowski similarly worked with Mike for years. "His sense of history, knowledge of the industry and life lessons have become invaluable to me as I grow older and face the challenges he spoke of so often," Orzechowski said. "I will certainly miss his insight and keen instincts. His thoughts on family life and strong conviction for the church will always remain at the forefront of any conversation I may have when someone asks, 'What was he like?' He dedicated every day to improvement and had great attention to detail. I will always appreciate the room he gave me to grow as a person and as a union representative. I could go on for pages about the love and admiration that I and so many others have for him, but I think that goes without saying. So many words could be used to describe his career and life, but for me there is only one, and that word is iconic."

President's Column

The Union Edge

The latest report on union membership from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reinforces what we in the labor movement have long known. Union members typically enjoy higher wages and better benefits than their unrepresented counterparts in the workforce.

Other reports and studies over the years have concluded that union members generally are more productive than non-union workers, and that union shops have less turnover. This makes sense, because when workers know they've got a true voice on the job, and when they have the security of a union contract, they are bound to be invested in their day-to-day tasks and responsibilities. I think people outside the labor movement also overlook the reciprocal, three-way accountability that comes with union membership. This involves the employer, the union, and the rank-and-file members. Our success is interdependent.

I was pleased to read about an overall increase in union membership this past year and I'm optimistic about our movement's opportunities to capitalize on the pro-worker, pro-union sentiments across the country.



David Heindel

Safety at Sea

The safety of SIU crews – in all of our areas of operation – is always our absolute top priority. With that in mind, the union is actively participating in high-level, recurring discussions involving our military leaders, vessel operators, fellow maritime unions and others – including the International Transport Workers' Federation – who are diligently working to help ensure the wellbeing of mariners (and ships) transiting the Red Sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden.

The formal launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian signaled a new level of commitment from the U.S. and our allies to protect commercial shipping in those areas. As you undoubtedly know, Houthis have attacked multiple vessels there with drones and missiles, which led to the United States redesignating the Yemen-based rebels as a global terrorist group.

It is, to say the least, a volatile and fluid situation. But we are staying in touch with our crews who sail in that region, and we're confident in the plans and actions of our military personnel, working cooperatively with the U.S. Merchant Marine.

I appreciate our members' dedication as well as that of our military and our allies. Stay tuned.

Saluting a Leader and Friend

It's no exaggeration to say I could write a book about SIU President Emeritus Mike Sacco, so there's no way to fully do justice to his career in just a few sentences, paragraphs or pages. But, having worked with Mike for decades, I want our members to know how much he cared about you and how much he loved this union.

Mike was easy to work for in the sense that he was inspirational and he set such a tremendous example by working as hard or harder than the rest of us. Like pretty much any great boss, he could be challenging, too – but only because he demanded our best. Mike believed in second chances and he didn't expect perfection, but he wasn't someone who listened to excuses. If we made a mistake, he wanted it fixed and he always kept us looking forward, devoting every resource to the SIU's health and the sustainability of our industry.

We will all miss him, but his energy, vision and leadership will live on through all of us in his SIU family.

SIU Directory

David Heindel, *President*

Augustin Tellez, *Executive Vice President*

Tom Orzechowski, *Secretary-Treasurer*

George Tricker, *Vice President Contracts*

Nicholas Celona,
Vice President Government Services

Joe Vincenzo,
Asst. Vice President Government Services

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CIVMARS, Seafarers Team Up During UNREP



The CIVMAR-crewed dry cargo ship *USNS Matthew Perry* (right) connects fuel lines with the SIU-crewed tanker *Badlands Trader* during a consolidated cargo replenishment operation in the vicinity of Okinawa, Japan, Dec. 15. The underway replenishment involved 335,000 gallons of aviation fuel that was transferred to the *Perry*. (Photo courtesy MSC)

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How to Become an SIU Member

Joining the SIU is easy and an important step in protecting your workplace rights. The union's website – www.seafarers.org – includes printable PDF versions of forms that mariners may use to request and authorize payroll deductions for labor organization dues. The forms are posted at: <https://www.seafarers.org/news/labor-maritime-news/civmar-news/>. Forms are also available under "SIU Forms" in the ABOUT tab.

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House Hearing Examines Red Sea Threat; SIU President Testifies

Testifying at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing on the volatility of Red Sea shipping, SIU President David Heindel underscored the U.S. Merchant Marine’s commitment to delivering the goods while also calling for continued safeguards that protect all mariners transiting the area.

Heindel spoke on behalf of several maritime labor organizations Jan. 30 in the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation. Three others joined him on the panel: Mediterranean Shipping Company Executive Vice President of Maritime Policy and Government Affairs Bud Darr; I.R. Consilium CEO Dr. Ian Ralby; and National Retail Federation Vice President of Supply Chain and Customs Policy Jonathan Gold.

Heindel testified for the SIU and also the American Maritime Officers; International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots; Marine Engineers’ Beneficial Association; Maritime Trades Department; and Transportation Trades Department.

“The United States Merchant Marine is proud of our record over the last quarter of a millennium,” Heindel stated in his formal testimony. “We have operated side-by-side with the United States military in virtually every conflict in the history of the United States. We provide the materiel and supplies to the warfighter and they, in turn, have protected our vessels and crews as we sail into harm’s way. While the current situation involves the Houthi rebels in Yemen, we may well face in the future more sophisticated adversaries. The experience we are gaining now has demonstrated to the U.S. citizen mariners who are in harm’s way that U.S. naval and other military personnel stand with them and will continue to do so.”

He added, “Working together again has strengthened the bond between the U.S. Merchant Marine and the military, and we hope our success will deter our adversaries from taking unwise action against American shipping. The efforts taken so far to protect our vessels in the region have demonstrated the United States is committed to protecting its shipping and keeping the sea lanes open, and we hope this will incentivize other carriers to put their vessels under the U.S.-flag and use American citizen mariners, as has happened in past conflicts. Our members aboard ship



SIU President David Heindel

and our organizations ashore are committed to working with Congress, the Administration, and the Armed Forces to continue doing what has been our traditional mission – to deliver the goods, in peace and in war, as we have since 1775.”

Moreover, he emphasized that the U.S.-flag industry’s “biggest need right now is secure communications, whether this is in the form of specialized equipment, naval liaisons embedded on board our ships, or additional American civilian mariners with proper clearances and certificates on board having direct communications between our ships and combat ships in the area.”

Subcommittee Chairman Daniel Webster (R-Florida) set the stage for the hearing in his opening statement, which included the following: “The Red Sea is critical as a shipping corridor for global maritime commerce connecting Europe and Asia and Suez Canal, representing nearly 20 percent of container traffic and a significant portion of oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.

Since October, Houthis, an Iranian backed separatist group based in Yemen, have sought to disrupt global commerce by significantly increasing attacks against military and civilian vessels transiting the Red Sea. To date, dozens of vessels have been targeted either through hijacking, attempted hijacking, or missile or drone strikes, putting ships and their crews at risk.”

Ranking Member Salud Carbajal (D-California) opened with a tribute to U.S. mariners. He said that the current risks at sea are, in some ways, “business as usual for American mariners. Through every emergency conflict and war, the United States Merchant Marine has shown up,” Carbajal stated. “They bravely sailed during World War II when ships were being sunk daily by torpedoes, (with) many lives lost. They delivered military supplies to our troops during the Gulf War, when foreign mariners and foreign companies refused. They routinely sail hospital ships to disaster-stricken regions. Currently, American mariners are showing their bravery and dedication by sailing through the Red Sea to deliver military

cargo and humanitarian aid to the region. Congress must find new and innovative ways to bolster the U.S. Merchant Marine.”

Darr was the first panelist to speak. He described the challenge in the Red Sea as “an unprecedented series of attacks by non-state actors upon commercial shipping. There have certainly been attacks in the past, either by states that were well-organized, and there have been attacks by non-state actors such as Somali piracy some time ago, which seems unfortunately to be reemerging now. But as non-state actors go, the level of sophistication of the targeting, the weaponry, and the boldness is absolutely unprecedented, and they have in fact taken control of a vital sea lane which is essential not only for U.S. economic interest, but for trade to flow more broadly throughout the world.”

Ralby, who later answered numerous inquiries during the hearing’s question-and-answer segment, explained some of the complexities in the region.

“Even if the Israel-Gaza situation ended today with a complete resolution that was mutually agreeable to all parties involved, the Houthis would continue to attack shipping,” he said. “One-hundred percent of the ballistic missile capabilities of the Houthis could be taken out, and the Houthis would still attack shipping.... Since the 19th of November, the Houthis have seized on a convenient narrative that played into something that they wanted. They have opportunistically taken advantage of the Palestinian situation and made it a cause that aligned with their own interests, albeit hypocritically so. If we look at that hypocrisy, the Houthis have, over the last 10 years, killed more Muslim Arabs than Israel has in 75 years of its existence. The Houthis do not care about the Palestinian cause, except insofar as it furthers them.”

Gold noted, “While the volume of U.S. trade through the Suez Canal is small, the disruption impacts are being felt far and wide. The biggest challenges for retailers are the additional volatility, cost uncertainty, and overall risk to the supply chain. Retailers are being forced to readjust their supply chains to ensure product delivery.”

The hearing lasted approximately two hours and included questions from a dozen or so lawmakers. Full video and PDF copies of the formal testimony are available on the SIU website and on the subcommittee site.

Union Membership Grows in U.S., Though Obstacles Impact Density

Newly released data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) found an overall increase in union membership across the country in 2023 along with a very slight drop in member density.

Published on Jan. 23, the annual report also concluded that union members, on average, earn more money than workers who do not have union representation – upwards of \$9,000 per year.

The report shows that overall union membership grew by 139,000 in 2023. Union membership in the private sector increased by 191,000 members, with a majority of new members under the age of 45.

According to the BLS, “The union membership rate – the percent of wage and salary workers who were members of unions – was 10.0 percent in 2023, little changed from the previous year.”

Responding to the report, the AFL-CIO (to which the SIU is affiliated) pointed out that although more than 70% of Americans polled in a recent survey approve of unions and 59% support unionization in their own workplaces, American workers face obstacles from several angles that prevent density numbers from increasing along with approval rates.

Union-busting is just one of many challenges workers face as they organize their workplaces, according to both the federation and the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). The latter organization noted, “At its core, the decline (in union density) reflects an intentional political effort to suppress workers’ wage growth and shift income to profits and executive salaries by stripping away the most important leverage that workers have – the right to bargain collectively.”

Acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su addressed the legislative challenges that must be dealt with in order to facilitate unionization for interested employees in both sectors. She stated, “We know there is a tremendous amount of work still to be done. Unions have been under attack for decades, with union-busting laws being passed in states across the country. But multiple states in recent years have rolled back some of these so-called ‘right-to-work’ laws, recognizing the damage they can do to worker organizing. We also know that current federal law allows union-busting to stifle workers exercising their rights, which is why the Biden-Harris administration continues to support passage of the Protecting the Right to Organize Act.”

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said, “Although union density remained flat in 2023, that doesn’t reflect the surging momentum that working people have carried into this year. Waves of workers across industries and geography are joining unions despite vicious union-busting campaigns by large corporations. Polling data shows that 71% of Americans support unions, the highest level in nearly 60 years, with 88% of young people showing support for unions. And as the BLS numbers show, the union difference in wages remains strong, driving increased interest among workers to have a voice on the job.

“Every worker who wants to join a union should be able to without facing intimidation and harassment from their employer,” Shuler continued. “Corporations spend more than \$400 million per year on union-busting consultants to stop worker organizing, and corporate leaders like Elon Musk and Jeff



AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler

Bezos – themselves hoarding billions of dollars – have made it their mission in life to stop their own employees from having a voice at the workplace.”

Shuler concluded, “The labor movement is more focused and committed than ever on ensuring that every worker who wants a union has a fair shot at joining one. Organizing is happening at a rate not seen in generations, and new federal investments by the Biden administration in emerging sectors of the economy creates more opportunity for workers to attain good union jobs.”

Among the data from the BLS report:

- The union membership rate of public-sector workers (32.5 percent) continued to be more than five times higher than the rate of private-sector workers (6.0 percent).

- The highest unionization rates were among workers in education, training, and library occupations (32.7 percent) and protective service occupations (31.9 percent).

- Men continued to have a higher union membership rate (10.5 percent) than women (9.5 percent).

- Black workers remained more likely to be union members than White, Asian, or Hispanic workers.

- Non-union workers had median weekly earnings that were 86 percent of earnings for workers who were union members (\$1,090 versus \$1,263).

- Among states, Hawaii and New York had the highest union membership rates (24.1 percent and 20.6 percent, respectively), while South Carolina and North Carolina had the lowest (2.3 percent and 2.7 percent, respectively).

Additionally, the head of the Department of Professional Employees (DPE) (to which the SIU also is affiliated) weighed in on the report. DPE President Jennifer Dorning said, “Professionals in unions are exercising their workplace rights and winning improved working conditions. The frequency and visibility of these victories combined with changes in the economy, such as high inflation, short staffing, and increasing use of AI in the workplace, have shown professionals that they need a real say in their workplaces, which can be achieved by joining together in union. DPE is proud to support our affiliated unions as they bring a growing number of professionals together to raise standards in their workplaces and in workplaces across the U.S.”

Seafarer Snapshots from the Fleet



Many thanks to SIU Government Services Division Representative Sam Spain for the photos on this page, taken during recent servicing visits. Crew members provided input for upcoming agreements and selected delegates for negotiations, among other topics they covered. Pictured clockwise, starting with the photo directly above, are crews aboard the NOAA Pisces, USNS Zeus, USNS Arctic, Nancy Foster, and USNS Medgar Evers.

