



January 8, 2026

The Honorable Marco Rubio  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary of War  
U.S. Department of War  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Rubio and Secretary Hegseth,

On behalf of the undersigned labor unions representing the majority of American merchant mariners working in the U.S.-flag fleet, we are reaching out in light of recent developments concerning U.S. foreign policy toward Venezuela and their potential impact on the American maritime sector, particularly the U.S.-flag shipping industry.

As the Administration explores policy options in response to the evolving situation in Venezuela, and as Congress considers legislative measures aimed at revitalizing the U.S.-flag fleet, **we are writing to express our support for proposals that would mandate all crude oil imports from Venezuela to be transported exclusively on U.S.-flag vessels crewed by American mariners.** This approach would not only align with the Administration's objectives but also help ensure that vital energy cargoes directly bolster U.S. maritime jobs, enhance economic security, and uphold our national interests.

For years, the United States has imposed extensive sanctions on Venezuela in response to systemic corruption, governance abuses, and documented human rights abuses against its citizens. While intended to address those concerns, sustained sanctions, combined with under-investment and maintenance shortfalls, have contributed to a prolonged economic crisis and a significant decline in Venezuela's oil industry. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Venezuela holds an estimated 303 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, representing one of the largest reserve bases in the world.

Although heavy crude oil and petroleum product exports from Venezuela to the United States face broad restrictions under current sanctions, these limitations have inadvertently redirected global trade patterns. As a result, foreign purchasers, especially Chinese refiners and traders, have largely taken over the imports of Venezuelan crude oil through intermediated and often unclear channels. This situation continues despite U.S. enforcement efforts aimed at foreign tanker operations and entities tied to sanctioned oil shipments, including actions against so-called "shadow fleet" vessels transporting Venezuelan and other sanctioned crude oil worldwide. Notably, Venezuela's struggle to market its heavy crude in traditional avenues has tightened global crude availability, as shifts in Asian trade patterns and extended tanker routes due to Russian oil exports further reshape international maritime transport networks.

On April 9, 2025, President Trump signed *Executive Order 14081*, titled "*Restoring America's Maritime Dominance*," which aims to revitalize U.S. commercial shipbuilding capacity, expand

the U.S.-flag fleet, strengthen the maritime workforce, and enhance our country's global shipping capabilities. This order also directs the creation of a comprehensive Maritime Action Plan (MAP) to meet these objectives, which is expected to be unveiled later this year.

A cornerstone of an effective national maritime policy is gaining access to private, commercial cargoes that create a steady demand for U.S.-flag vessels, American mariners, and the shipbuilding industrial base. To foster growth in the U.S.-flag fleet and boost the competitiveness of the American maritime industry, it is crucial that U.S.-flag carriers and their American crews have access to reliable, long-term cargo opportunities in the global trade landscape.

Mandating U.S.-flag transport for Venezuelan crude entering the country would stimulate demand for U.S.-flag commercial services, fortify the maritime industrial base, and strengthen America's standing in global trade. Furthermore, responsibly allowing access to Venezuelan crude for U.S. refiners, many of which are designed to process heavy crude, could enhance supply diversity and aid in stabilizing domestic energy costs amid ongoing inflation.

We sincerely appreciate and support the Administration's ongoing efforts to revitalize and expand the United States-flag fleet as part of our national and economic security. American mariners are ready to step up and assist the Administration in its efforts to counteract malign foreign influences that seek to transport sanctioned goods through opaque and unsafe channels.

Requiring U.S.-flag vessels, manned by American mariners, to transport Venezuelan crude oil legally and safely would uphold long-standing maritime principles and ensure that essential global energy supply chains function effectively in accordance with U.S. laws and standards.

Thank you for considering this proposal and addressing this important issue.

Sincerely,

*Willie Barrere, President, American Maritime Officers*

*Dave Heindel, President, Seafarers International Union*

*Don Josberger, President, International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots*

*Adam Vokac, President, Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association*

cc: Mr. Michael Waltz, United States Ambassador to the United Nations  
Mr. Russ Vought, Director, Office of Management and Budget (OMB)  
Mr. Henry J. Hendrix, Deputy to the Associate Director for Defense (OMB)  
Mr. Stephen Carmel, Administrator, U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD)  
Mr. Sang Yi, Deputy Administrator, U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD)