

Hero nun to rescue of ship 'slaves'

EXCLUSIVE

JACK MORPHET

SISTER Mary Leahy has devoted 28 years to the seemingly hopeless task of rescuing poor and disadvantaged crewmen from what she calls "slavery".

But the unending nature of this struggle cannot stop the burning determination of this feisty Irish-born nun.

Sister Mary was the only person to answer an advertisement in a church newsletter three decades ago for someone to help ship workers – and has been battling for their rights ever since.

"Without a doubt this is modern slavery," Sister Mary said. The injustice of this exploitation is what keeps her going, even when it seems the rest of Australia and indeed the world does not care.

"Why must the seafarers suffer so we can have cheap goods?" she said.

"It's easy to keep these people subservient because they are out of sight and out of mind. We know the price of everything and value of nothing, which is perhaps why we're willing to accept human sacrifice for cheap goods in Sydney stores."

Her own poor upbringing in Cork has meant the former St Vincent's Hospital emergency nurse can connect with the workers. While they are too scared to talk to Australian officials, they will open up to Sister Mary.

When she boards a foreign-flagged container ship at Port Botany, she expects to find the crew have been underpaid and overworked.

With COVID-19 safety



measures preventing crew from setting foot on Australian soil, she now greets incoming ships with Australian phone cards so seafarers can tell their loved ones not to expect them home on time.

"The crew don't have any say over when they will be able to go home, so they do their best just to survive," she said. "The captains are afraid to say how long their crew have been on board but I have absolutely met crew recently who have been on board for 14 months without a break.

"Poor working conditions are absolutely the norm, not the exception."

Sister Mary routinely smuggles letters off ships, written by distraught seafarers begging Australian officials to board and investigate their ships for international labour law breaches. Late last week the 11th ship in the past 14 weeks was detained after the crew was found working in slave-like conditions.

Liberian flagged container ship Hansa Offenburg was detained at Port Botany when it was discovered the crew had been working for 15 months without a break.

The ship was allowed to sail to Port Kembla, where it must stay until the crew is flown home to the Philippines

and tiny island nation Kiribati and replacements found.

Maritime lawyer Glenn Kolomeitz said Australian companies that imported and exported goods on ships had obligations under Australian and international law to ensure slavery was not occurring. "But (they) are rarely demanding foreign-flagged shipping lines comply," Mr Kolomeitz said. A spokesman for Deputy Prime Minister

Michael McCormack said the federal government was ensuring compliance with maritime labour law by inspecting 11.3 per cent of ships.

Sister Mary Leahy d supplies to seafarers cannot disembark because of COVID-19.

Picture: Tim Hunter.

