

Proposal for the 3rd MMHN Conference

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The Black Gang: Marine Engineers, Firemen and Trimmers in Spanish Merchant Navy (1817-1893)

The process of change from sail to steam in the shipping industry provoked, from the point of view of the labour relations, the breaking of traditional models of long history. The installation of steam engines and other auxiliary machinery on board brought the incorporation of new professional profiles at service. A few individuals who lived lower-deck, among machines and coal dust, burst into a clean world of people who worked outdoor, with fresh air in their faces. These new professionals did not have a proper tradition and were not even considered to be seamen.

In Spain, engine labourers will reproduce a hierarchic scheme similar to the existing one in the sailing ships, with big differences between the qualified officials (the marine engineers), those who exercise a relatively qualified work that demands few skills and a previous experience (firemen and oilers) and, of course, the workforce of a minor category that is based especially on a physical effort (the trimmers).

These new categories fitted slowly in the world of the navigation, but not without conflict. This paper focuses on the different circumstances brought up by these new categories, as for example the process that took workers from mechanical workshops to the sea; requirement of technical knowledge; learning and training processes; recruitment, wages, conditions of work, etc.

The core of this approach will be the Spanish marine engineers and the conflict at different levels:

- The fight, in early times, against the control of the jobs by foreign engineers, mostly British.
- The legal regulation of the profession and the recognition of a new category, highly qualified from the technical point of view. Even though the profession was officially established in 1877, the struggle for the recognition of the profession lasted over a decade. We should bear in mind that marine engineers founded back in 1877 the first trade union of maritime workers ever existing in Spain, even before the nautical officers created their own associations.
- The resistance of the shipowners, who badly received the regulations as a limitation to their freedom to contract.
- The comparison in category and in salary between nautical officers and engine officers
- The constant discussion on where it is the authentic heart of the ship, at the Bridge or at the Engine room, that is to say, between the Master and the Chief Engineering. This has to be with status and social recognition indeed.

In 1893 marine engineers were accepted at the Junta de la Marina Mercante in the same conditions as the nautical officers. It was a landmark in the recognition of this profession.

CV

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