**Headline:** Why America Needs a Commercial Shipbuilding Industry

By David McCall

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**[Article Body:]**

James Crawford served five years in the U.S. Marine Corps maintaining the radar systems on super-sophisticated warplanes built to fend off enemy attacks from air, sea, and land.

But not once during his time in numerous ports as far away as Asia did he see a U.S. commercial vessel plying the seas, a sign, he now realizes, of another kind of threat to the homeland.

America’s security begins with skilled union workers manufacturing the goods, equipment, and other essentials, including cargo freighters and tankers, needed to keep the nation independent and free.

And so Crawford joined fellow members of the United Steelworkers (USW) recently in taking action to [resuscitate the country’s decimated commercial shipbuilding industry](https://www.ft.com/content/62f902ed-9bb5-4167-84f0-4f1257889a97) and end a growing, perilous dependence on Chinese shipping.

The USW and other unions filed a petition with U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai seeking an investigation into [China’s illegal](https://www.usw.org/news/media-center/releases/2024/usw-files-section-301-petition-on-shipbuilding) predatory trade practices, unfair state support for its own commercial shipbuilding industry, and plot to dominate global logistics networks.

China’s network of policies—including massive subsidies for the industry, such as [cash payments, tax incentives, and other handouts](https://www.csis.org/analysis/hidden-harbors-chinas-state-backed-shipping-industry#:~:text=China%20encouraged%20its%20already%20massive,the%20world's%20third%20largest%20shipping)—continues to kill competition in America and other countries. As a result, China not only controls an [enormous percentage](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2023-11-15_IF12534_dc64343953cbeb745275d998c39d542b5dfa0b2c.pdf) of the world’s commercial shipbuilding output but wields the power to cut off access to ships it builds and operates at any time, for any reason.

“You can’t go somewhere to fight if you’re weak at home,” observed Crawford, unit president for USW Local 3372-07 who works at Hunt Valve in Salem, Ohio, noting that the U.S. not only needs commercial ships to carry manufactured goods to the far corners of the world but to provide sealift capacity to the military in times of crisis.

The United States once had about 30 major shipyards with 180,000 workers and contracts for more than 70 commercial vessels a year. But tens of thousands of those shipyard jobs disappeared since the 1980s as China hijacked the industry.

Some shipyards, like the USW-represented complex in Newport News, Virginia, began focusing entirely on military contracts. Others, like the [Sun Shipping and Dry Dock](https://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-2EB) complex in Chester, Pennsylvania, once the world’s largest shipyard and a center of shipbuilding innovation, simply closed. A casino now occupies the property.

As of 2022, the handful of remaining American shipbuilders had just five commercial vessels under construction, while [China had nearly 1,800](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2023-11-15_IF12534_dc64343953cbeb745275d998c39d542b5dfa0b2c.pdf), according to data collected by the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

And China is far from finished. Rather, it’s turning an island into a [“colossal shipbuilding base”](https://chinapower.csis.org/analysis/china-changxing-island-shipbuilding-base-jiangnan-shipyard/) for its military and commercial sectors, according to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

“Nobody wants China to be taking our jobs,” said Crawford, part of the delegation of USW members who gathered at the U.S. Capitol to request the investigation into China. “Everybody wants ships made, wants them produced, here. We need to be able to rely on American-made products.”

The decline of shipbuilding also took a toll on numerous supply chains serving the industry.

After leaving the Marines, for example, Crawford returned to Salem and took a job at Hunt Valve partly because it makes components for Navy ships and submarines, offering a way for him to continue serving the country.

But he said workers there experienced weakening demand for the valves and actuators they produce for commercial ships as America’s shipbuilding industry declined over the years.

Rebuilding the industry means more jobs at Hunt Valve, Crawford said, noting the strong union contract enables workers to provide health care to their families, buy houses, plan for retirement, and live middle-class lives.

In all, a new shipbuilding era portends a boost for tens of thousands of workers nationwide who make the aluminum, cable, glass, pipe, steel, forged products, anti-skid grating material, waterproof cabinetry, motors, springs, and numerous other items needed to build container ships and tankers.

“It would help us tremendously,” said Steve Townsend, unit chair of USW Local 3261-01 at Rochester Metal Products in Rochester, Indiana, pointing out that he and about 100 co-workers already manufacture components for personal watercrafts and supply several other industries with products weighing up to about 100 pounds.

“We can make just about anything having to do with iron castings. We’re very versatile,” said Townsend, citing hooks, brackets, water pumps, and engine components as just a handful of the items he and other members of Local 3261-01 have the capacity to provide for commercial ships.

And the workers’ craftsmanship is second to none, added Townsend, noting, “You want something that’s going to hold up. If something is going on a cargo ship, you don’t want it to break.”

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the Maritime Trades Department, AFL-CIO, all joined the USW’s petition requesting the investigation into China’s illicit efforts to dominate the commercial shipping market.

A growing number of elected officials, including [U.S. Senators Bob Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania and Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin](https://www.casey.senate.gov/news/releases/casey-baldwin-back-steelworkers-in-fight-against-unfair-chinese-trade-practices-in-shipbuilding), also recognize the urgent need to re-shore the industry and break China’s chokehold. “On a level playing field, American workers can out-compete anyone,” stressed Casey.

Townsend, who’s already rallying his co-workers around the trade case, views a reinvigorated shipbuilding industry as essential to America’s future.

“It means jobs for American people,” he said. “It’s making the country stronger.”