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Bug-infested tugboat detained in Halifax; Crew wants to go home; owner unimpressed

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Illustrations: Andrew Vaughan, The Canadian Press / Crew members have lived aboard the 68-year-old boat since Dec. 18, when it was detained in Nova Scotia because of safety problems.;

The crew of a cock-roach-infested tugboat detained in Halifax for safety problems should fix them instead of appealing to the public for help to return to their homes in Central America, the owner of the vessel said Wednesday.

Eight crew members have been living aboard the 68-year-old boat since Dec. 18, when it sailed into Halifax to escape a winter gale. Transport Canada inspectors detained it, citing poor living conditions, pollution and concerns over its seaworthiness.

The Mission to Seafarers launched a public appeal for help on the crew's behalf to cover the costs of flying them back to their families in Honduras and El Salvador. The group said it has raised about \$7,000 in cash and enough Aeroplan points to fly them home, but they are waiting for the points to be transferred to the sailors.

But Gerard Antoine, the president of New Jersey-based Vesta Shipping, which owns the tugboat, said the crew should repair the vessel and complete a journey to Montreal to pick up another vessel and tow it to Mexico.

"I didn't send them home," he said by phone. "Unless the person is sick ... you sign something to come to Canada and to

go to Mexico. You have a contract."

Antoine said he doesn't think he has any responsibility to help pay for tickets to ensure the crew returns home while the boat is detained.

"Any boat or any ship could be detained for many reasons. What do you do? The crew ... work and clear up the deficiencies."

Antoine also played down the problems found on the boat, saying he believes they can be fixed in about two weeks.

"Most deficiencies they have are cosmetic things," he said.

But several of the crew members have said they did not feel safe on the vessel during long voyages in rough seas.

Capt. Milton Tabora said there were problems with the ship's engine and there are holes in the deck that leak. He and other crew members said they want to return home to find other work and pay school fees so their children can return to school in February.

Gerard Bradbury, an inspector with the International Transport Workers' Federation, gave the media tours around the tug this week to show them kitchen

drawers infested with cockroaches.

He said he has rarely seen such poor living conditions for mariners.

Antoine said it is up to the crew to keep the vessel clean.

"The vessel is very dirty," he said. "Why? Because the crew isn't cleaning up the ship."