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Turkish sailors marooned in Sorel; 11-man crew unpaid for a month, food running low

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Illustrations: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE / Phoenix Sun captain Semih Ozkan, left, and his crew were in high spirits Friday as Sorel offered money and support.;

Semih Ozkan and his 11-man crew can't seem to get out of Quebec.

They came from Turkey to Sorel in April, hoping to make minor repairs to the Phoenix Sun freighter before sailing it across the Atlantic and waiting for their next contract.

Now, almost four months later, the ship is still marooned, the sailors haven't been paid in more than a month and their food supply nearly ran out this week.

Ozkan, the ship's captain, says his crew was duped by the Phoenix Sun's Hamilton-based owner - who allegedly broke off contact with the Turks 11 days ago.

"We were told it would be small repairs and then we go home," said Ozkan, who has a wife and three children waiting for him in Turkey. "This ship needs to be dry docked, the owner won't pay for spare parts for the engine, it needs major repairs. We're not (equipped) to do that - we only operate these ships."

The Phoenix Sun has been rotting by a concrete dock in Sorel since 2011. Before it was purchased by Mengu Pasinli's Menpas shipping company, the vessel's two

previous owners went bankrupt trying to repair it, sail it overseas and flip it for scrap metal.

Now the crew members - who are living in the ship - say Pasinli is renegeing on his duties to pay and feed them. They say they last received a paycheque in mid-July, and only after lobbying Transport Canada to pressure Pasinli. Most of the sailors earn between \$500 and \$800 a month. An inspector with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) was on site Friday and didn't mask his outrage at the sailors' situation.

"It's like if I worked at Mc-Donald's and instead of an eight-hour shift, they told me to stay for 16 hours," said ITF inspector Vince Giannopoulos. "These guys have been here for months longer than they were supposed to and they weren't paid for almost two months. It's awful. It's an outrage."

Pasinli did not return The Gazette's phone calls. While his Hamilton-based company owns the ship, it is certified in Panama, which slightly complicates the issue of jurisdiction for Canadian officials. Giannopoulos said he has spoken to Pasinli and can't get a clear answer as to why the sailors aren't being paid or fed and when

they can expect to go home. The workers stopped making repairs on the vessel last week in an attempt to force Pasinli's hand. Transport Canada workers boarded the Phoenix Sun Friday afternoon to inspect the ship formally. There appears to be an issue with the vessel's fire alarm and certification, Giannopoulos said.

The ITF, which ensures basic workplace standards are met in the shipping industry, donated food and water to the sailors Tuesday. The Sorel community also appears to be rallying behind the stranded Turks.

Friday afternoon, a dock worker parked his pickup truck outside the ship and handed the crew \$400 in cash. Reverend Charles Boucher, who runs a local food bank, also offered Ozkan and his men warm meals and a hot shower.

But as he stood on the ship's deck, staring at the smokestacks and warehouses that dot the horizon, Ozkan said he just wants to go home. Under the deck, in the crew's living quarters, the ship was hot, dark and smelled like sweat.

"My children need their father," Ozkan told The Gazette. "The other boys have families. They just want to go home."

The city of Sorel has been trying to send the Phoenix Sun out to sea and out of mind for months now. But it appears they'll have to keep staring at its rust-covered hull for the foreseeable future.

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