



**EUROPEAN TRANSPORT  
WORKERS' FEDERATION**

**ETF vision on  
How to boost rail freight transport  
European Strategy for Smart and Sustainable Mobility**

Rail freight not only makes a significant contribution to achieving the climate and environmental policy objectives in Europe, it is also very important for the European economy and thus employment. Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, rail freight has kept Europe running, transporting food and medical goods and providing the manufacturing industry with raw materials and parts from suppliers. Even during the height of the pandemic, freight trains ran across borders quickly, reliably and sustainably. This was possible only because of dedicated railway workers, key workers, who have continued working during this difficult situation and contributed to the resilience of the rail freight system. Rail has thus proven to be the backbone of the European transport system.

We urgently need concrete steps in European transport policy. The planned increase of the modal share of rail as started in the European Green Deal requires a strong European political commitment and support in all segments - wagonload freight, block trains and combined transport - which need to be developed into a powerful European network. ETF analysis finds that the EU railway policy so far with a focus on liberalisation, market opening and competition did not deliver.<sup>1</sup> The European Green Deal and the Recovery and Resilience plans should be an important framework for (re-)shaping these rail and transport policies.

While the rail sector is increasingly struggling to fill vacancies, it is estimated that there are more than 15 million unemployed people in the EU today, of whom almost 3 million are young people under 25<sup>2</sup>. The establishment of rail transport as a source of job creation can also be seen as a strategy to cater for young people without jobs and be an essential part of the recovery after Covid-19. At the same time, there is a need to promote re-establishing of apprenticeships, secondary education specialization on rail technology and rail traffic management in particular countries.

The EU's liberal railway policies, with their focus on opening the market and liberalisation, have not made true on the objective to increase the use of rail for freight transport. Rail freight transport has been fully liberalised since 2006. In 14 years of European open rail freight markets and competition within the railway sector, social short comings increased without increasing the modal share of rail freight transport. The share of rail in total freight transport, taking into account rail, road and inland waterways, has declined.<sup>3</sup> Whereas in 2006, in the EU-27, rail had a share of 18.9% of freight transported, in 2019 the number dropped to 17.6%. All this while the share of road freight transport has increased from 74.3 % in 2006 to 76.3 % in 2019<sup>4</sup>.

Current EU policies for rail freight have a strong focus on international long-distance corridors. What we need is an overall rail freight strategy that includes maintaining and promoting single wagon load operations, maintaining and promoting feeder lines and rail sidings for the industry. This way the rail freight system can contribute to the economic and social cohesion and employment in the regions.

We call for a compulsory target to achieve a modal share on rail of 30% by 2030 in Europe in line with the sector statement.<sup>5</sup> To achieve this, another transport policy is necessary. One

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<sup>1</sup> See ETF (2021), *Lessons learned from three decades on unbundling in the rail sector*: <https://www.etf-europe.org/resource/lessons-learned-from-three-decades-of-unbundling-in-the-railway-sector/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics)

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the EU-27 rail freight performance in 2006 stood at 398 billion tonne-kilometres, while in 2019 it was even lower at 397 billion tonne-kilometres, with a peak of (only) 416 billion tonne-kilometres in 2007, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Railway\\_freight\\_transport\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Railway_freight_transport_statistics)

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tran\\_hv\\_frmod/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tran_hv_frmod/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>5</sup> See CER, *Sector Statement on boosting rail freight*:

[http://www.cer.be/sites/default/files/publication/181008\\_Sector\\_Statement\\_Progress\\_Report.pdf](http://www.cer.be/sites/default/files/publication/181008_Sector_Statement_Progress_Report.pdf)

that actively promotes rail freight transport as a “service of general interests” for the European economy and citizens. Such a policy should include the following aspects.

## **1. Cooperation instead of competition**

- 1.1 The optimization of freight transport by rail does not fail because of insufficient corridor-conditions. It often fails because of the individual companies, which, forced by the mechanisms of competition, are unwilling to cooperate with other companies in matters of innovation and putting the sector forward. Therefore, interoperability and cooperation between rail companies to better serve needs rather competition should be promoted;
- 1.2 The establishment of large national players, ideally in public hands, should be supported, while limiting the continuous sprouting of small private companies;
- 1.3 The complementarity with other modes of transport needs to be promoted more effectively;
- 1.4 Public funding is needed for freight infrastructure and to promote single wagon loads and complete or combined trains to be able to achieve the ambitious goals for the increasing of the modal share of rail freight transport. This can best be done by funding public companies that can enable these services;
- 1.5 Large shippers and logistics providers should be encouraged to make increasingly more use of rail transport - including through dedicated incentives and the construction of appropriate infrastructure - to achieve a target of 30% by 2030 in line with the industry’s own ambitions<sup>6</sup>;
- 1.6 An EU-wide legal requirement is considered needed for all semi-trailers to be suitable for combined transport and adapted for crane lifting (over 90 percent of HGV semi-trailers today are not suitable for combined transport and are therefore excluded from a shift to rail).

## **2. Public action to create a level playing field**

- 2.1 The increase of the modal split of rail freight transport can be achieved by rapidly eliminating competition based on social and economic conditions of employees between transport modes. This includes, among other measures, the abolition of unacceptable inhumane working and living conditions for many employees in other transport sectors such as the road and aviation sector, but also establishing fair and equal taxes on for example fuel, energy and VAT;
- 2.2 A Europe-wide standardisation of truck tolls for freight transport and investments in infrastructure are also essential to increase the modal share of rail;
- 2.3 We need internalisation of external costs, full application of the polluter pays principle and fair pricing for all transport modes;
- 2.4 The rail system should be organised in integrated companies to guarantee the efficiency of transport, integration of multimodal transport and equal of working conditions for railway workers.

## **3. Infrastructure investment**

- 3.1 An integrated approach to rail freight infrastructure, integrating long distance, regional freight, single wagon load, feeder lines and industrial sidings is needed;
- 3.2 A European plan to recover and further develop the rail network, including sidings, intermodal transport units, new lines and electrification is considered necessary;

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<sup>6</sup> CER & Rail Freight Forward (2020), [30 by 2030 – how rail freight achieves its goals](#)

- 3.3 Governments should take targeted actions to establish good railway connections between important hubs of infrastructure such as ports and industrial regions;
- 3.4 The rail infrastructure should be state-owned;
- 3.5 Interoperability of the European railways needs to be improved by assuring electrification of rail lines, development of a continuous rail network for freight trains on main European corridors, investment in combined transport terminals;

#### **4. Revision of the Rail Freight Corridors Regulation:**

- 4.1 Current regulations promote only one segment of rail freight transport, namely international long-distance block train operations. What we need is an overall rail freight strategy that includes maintaining and promoting single wagon load operations, maintaining and promoting feeder lines and rail sidings for the industry. An infrastructure planning based on economic and social cohesion of the regions and the employment effect of rail (freight) operations or a fair pricing of all transport modes;
- 4.2 Rail freight corridors must be integrated in a holistic freight transport strategy, whilst keeping the division of tasks (train operators, maintenance, etc.) and respecting safety and social sustainability. We do not accept social dumping practices;
- 4.3 Trade unions and workers representatives are currently not considered as stakeholders within the corridor governance. Important topics as working time rules and working conditions are not considered. Trade unions and workers representatives must be recognised stakeholders within the governance (advisory groups and working groups) of the corridors;
- 4.4 The names of the companies requesting infrastructure capacity as well as the duration of the slot shall be available for inspection authorities and NSAs in order to facilitate inspections of respect of working, driving and rest time rules.

#### **5. Attractive social conditions / no social dumping**

- 5.1 Abolishing wage and social dumping in all transport sectors is a priority;
- 5.2 No temporary agency workers, particularly for safety relevant professions;
- 5.3 Maintaining a high level of language skills for safe operations cannot be questioned and shall not go under the existing level of B1;
- 5.4 Instruments to assure the respect of working, driving and rest time and proper monitoring and enforcement of the competent authorities in particular also across borders need to be introduced;
- 5.5 Cross-border cooperation of inspection authorities and NSA, relevant in particular also on the rail freight corridors, should be regular and mandatory;
- 5.6 The growth of the rail freight sector must be accompanied by commitment for high health and safety standards, qualifications and dignity of workers (for example, toilets on freight trains and/or full access to toilets on the routes).
- 5.7 The quality and duration of training should be standardised at a high minimum level in Europe.

#### **6. Inclusive digitalisation & automation and just transition**

- 6.1 Use digitalisation and automation to support the rail freight system and facilitate sustainable working conditions in the sector, as well as improving health & safety at work;
- 6.2 Ensure an inclusive introduction of such technologies based on just transition, ensure investment in skills for job security and social dialogue from the very beginning of the investment decision, design and deployment; involve workers representatives in the development processes;

- 6.3 Funding of innovation in rail freight in order to increase capacity and productivity on the rail network (ETCS technology, digital interlocking, digital automatic coupling) as well as the training and upskilling of workers, are important as it involves workers representatives in the development processes (see [ETF-position paper on Digital Automatic Coupling](#));
- 6.4 Managing digital tools in connection with Big Data to develop multimodal solutions and thus achieve the increased modal share of rail.