



EU Port Strategy: competitiveness, security and quality jobs must go hand in hand

In its first reaction, the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) welcomes the publication of the European Commission's EU Port Strategy. Ports are central to Europe's economy, trade, and transport networks, and a clear strategic framework is essential for a sustainable, competitive, and socially responsible port sector. At a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, climate challenges, and pressure on supply chains, a coordinated European approach to ports is both necessary and timely.

ETF particularly emphasises that ports are not only gateways for goods, energy, and data but also major workplaces. While the Strategy acknowledges the importance of skills, workforce challenges, and social dialogue, the social and labour dimension remains largely confined to a single section. Key areas such as resilience, security, investment, and governance continue to be addressed primarily through an infrastructure and competitiveness lens, with limited integration of employment and social considerations.

As the leading representative of port workers at European level, ETF will actively engage with EU institutions, social partners, and stakeholders throughout the legislative process to improve and implement the Strategy, ensuring that the interests and voices of European port workers are fully integrated across all policy areas.

Employment, fair competition and vertical integration

ETF stresses that a well-functioning internal market must safeguard employment in the port sector. We welcome the Commission's intention to address both horizontal and non-horizontal effects of mergers in the revision of the Merger Guidelines — a measure we have repeatedly called for to protect fair competition and jobs in ports.

ETF also welcomes the growing attention given to **vertical integration** in the port and logistics sector and encourages the Commission to continue and deepen its work in this area. The increasing concentration of power among large shipping lines, terminal operators, and logistics providers is reshaping traditional port ecosystems and may pose risks to fair competition, balanced governance, and employment. Continued monitoring and analysis are therefore essential to ensure a level playing field and to protect workers and the public interest. ETF therefore calls for close scrutiny of consolidation trends in the sector and for competition policy to fully take into account the impact on employment, working conditions, and the long-term governance of European ports.

Port concessions

Concession agreements play an important role in ensuring efficient, modern, and financially sustainable port operations. They enable ports to attract substantial private investment for the construction, modernization, and operation of terminals, while safeguarding the **strategic public character of port infrastructure**.



ETF strongly supports a **transparent framework based on the landlord port model**, whereby port authorities retain ownership of land and core infrastructure and maintain strategic control, while awarding long-term concessions to private operators for terminal development and operations. This model ensures that ports continue to serve long-term **public, economic, and environmental objectives**, while mobilising private capital and expertise. We also insist that longer concession periods provide legal certainty, enable sustainable long-term investment, and support stable employment, high safety standards, and consistent training policies.

ETF underlines that **European ports already operate in a highly competitive environment**, both within ports and between ports. Further pressure to increase competition through shorter concessions is therefore neither necessary nor justified.

At the same time, concession frameworks must fully respect collective bargaining rights, uphold high safety standards, ensure decent working conditions, and guarantee that new concessionaires honour existing labour agreements and staffing levels. ETF also notes that the Strategy links concession frameworks to wider strategic objectives, including security, resilience, and decarbonisation. While these objectives are legitimate public policy goals, they must not be used to weaken labour protections, bypass collective agreements, or undermine established employment frameworks within ports. In this way, the landlord model combines strategic public oversight with responsible private participation, delivering both economic efficiency and social sustainability in port operations.

Foreign influence, FDI and security in EU ports

ETF welcomes the Commission's focus on foreign influence in EU ports, particularly through the FDI Screening Regulation, which requires Member States to assess foreign direct investments in TEN-T network ports. Protecting ports from undue foreign influence is not only a matter of economic oversight but also of safeguarding jobs, industrial relations, and operational continuity.

ETF believes that minimising these risks requires a **multi-dimensional approach**, particularly as ports are increasingly recognised as critical infrastructure within the EU's economic security framework. Transparency on ownership and control is essential, particularly when state-linked investors are involved. Screening processes should assess not only commercial and strategic implications but also the impact on labour, social dialogue, and collective bargaining, as changes to workforce conditions can be early indicators of wider systemic risks. Operational resilience — including cybersecurity, supply-chain continuity, and critical dependencies — must also be addressed.

ETF notes that while the Strategy contains strong social language regarding EU support to ports in third countries, similar emphasis should be more clearly reflected in relation to **FDI in EU ports**. Although FDI screening follows a horizontal EU framework, ETF calls for the explicit integration of **social standards, labour impact assessments, and social dialogue considerations** into FDI-related decision-making affecting European ports.

Worker representatives must be meaningfully involved in assessment and mitigation processes to ensure that employment, labour rights, and collective bargaining are fully protected. Openness to foreign investment should therefore be **conditional**, subject to enforceable safeguards that protect the public interest, labour standards, and strategic capabilities.



Guiding principles for EU support to third-country ports

ETF welcomes the Commission's intention to establish guiding principles for EU support to ports in third countries, including references to fair competition, sustainability, and social standards. ETF notes, however, that these principles remain relatively general and will require strong implementation to ensure that EU-supported port activities abroad fully reflect European values, particularly with regard to labour rights, social dialogue, and decent working conditions. ETF therefore encourages the Commission to further strengthen these principles and ensure that social standards are systematically reflected in EU external port investments and partnerships.

Green transition and ports as energy hubs

ETF welcomes the Commission's recognition of the crucial role ports play in the green transition and their potential to become energy hubs. Ports can act as central nodes for clean fuels, renewable energy, and electrification, but achieving this requires more than financial support. Clear regulatory pathways, coordinated spatial planning, and streamlined permitting are essential to ensure that hydrogen, LNG, onshore power supply, batteries, and other multi-fuel infrastructure can be deployed efficiently.

ETF also calls for a **fair allocation of EU climate and energy funding**, including revenues from the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), to support port decarbonisation. Investments in electrification, onshore power supply, and alternative fuels must go hand in hand with workforce transition plans, training programmes, and the creation of quality jobs.

Social governance is fundamental to a **just energy transition**. Energy hub projects must guarantee quality jobs, include workforce upskilling programmes, and involve social partners in planning and decision-making. Transition plans should be negotiated with workers to protect existing employment while preparing the workforce for new technologies and fuels. Interoperable infrastructure, harmonised safety standards, and coordinated fuel supply chains are equally essential.

Protect and secure ports

ETF strongly supports the Strategy's focus on crime prevention and port security, particularly measures to combat organised crime. Ports are critical nodes in Europe's logistics chains, and their security is vital for public safety and economic integrity. In light of the Strategy's increased focus on hybrid threats, sabotage risks, and the protection of critical infrastructure, ETF stresses that port workers must be recognised as key partners in strengthening resilience and security across Europe's ports.

Port workers are often on the frontline of these challenges and may face direct threats or coercion from criminal networks. ETF therefore strongly welcomes the Strategy's **“protect and train” approach**, which recognises workers as key partners in safeguarding ports rather than treating them as part of the problem. Security measures must prioritise worker protection, training, and empowerment, including safe reporting channels, physical and psychological support, and appropriate safeguards in high-risk environments.



Any EU port security framework must be firmly grounded in a worker-protection approach and acknowledge the indispensable role of dockers and port workers in ensuring safe and secure ports.

Workforce, skills and quality jobs

ETF warmly welcomes the explicit inclusion of port workers in the EU Port Strategy. Ports are not only strategic economic assets but also major employment hubs, and the skills, safety, and rights of the workforce are essential to resilience and competitiveness.

ETF welcomes the Strategy's attention to health and safety, including the application of maritime safety legislation to port workers operating on board ships, following recent amendments to the Maritime Accident Investigation Directive. We also support EMSA's planned guidance on applying maritime safety legislation to port workers.

The Strategy highlights the EU-funded "*Working Together. Much Safer*" project, created and promoted by ETF to improve safety in ports. The establishment of a European Network for Safety in Ports represents an important step towards sustained cooperation, training, best-practice exchange, and improved safety outcomes across the sector.

ETF also welcomes the Commission's interest in developing **skills partnerships** in the port sector and confirms its willingness to engage constructively. At the same time, ETF stresses that skills initiatives must **complement – not substitute – broader social action**. Upskilling and reskilling must go hand in hand with strong labour standards, effective social dialogue, and the full implementation of collective agreements to ensure quality jobs and safe working conditions.

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