

Transforming Rail Freight: A Joint Call for Sustainable and Efficient Transport

Within the framework of the Social Sectoral Dialogue on Railways, the Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER) and the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) have issued a joint statement emphasizing the pivotal role of rail freight in Europe's transition to a sustainable and efficient transport system. That statement effectively highlights the importance of focusing on key areas to ensure the future success and competitiveness of rail freight in the EU. It also emphasizes the need for decision-makers to enhance the overall competitiveness framework by implementing specific measures.

1. Ensuring a Level Playing Field Between All Modes of Transport

Social partners emphasize the urgent need for the EU to close long-standing regulatory gaps that disadvantage rail freight compared to other transport modes. Despite rail's environmental and efficiency advantages, current policies fail to create a level playing field, with road transport continuing to dominate. A fair competitive environment requires the full implementation of key legislation, including the Eurovignette Directive and the Fit for 55 package, ensuring that pricing reflects the true environmental and societal costs of each mode through the "polluter pays" and "user pays" principles. Addressing these imbalances is essential for safeguarding rail's competitiveness and aligning with the EU's climate and sustainability goals.

2. Long-Term Investment in Rail Freight

Stable, long-term public funding at both EU and Member State levels is crucial to modernizing rail freight and meeting future demand. Additional resources are needed to upgrade, maintain, and expand infrastructure, and modernize freight rolling stock, with financial stability key to retaining a skilled workforce. Increased support within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Emissions Trading System revenues for rail decarbonization are essential.

3. Promoting Single Wagon Load and Combined Transport Operations

Single Wagon Load (SWL) and Combined Transport (CT) services are critical for maintaining efficient and sustainable freight operations across Europe. However, both face significant challenges due to market imbalances and a regulatory framework that does not sufficiently reflect their contribution to reducing external costs such as congestion, greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and accidents. Targeted financial support and adjusted state aid rules are necessary to maintain these essential services and help the EU meet its long-term sustainability, safety, and energy efficiency goals.

4. Digitalization for Efficiency of the Railway Sector

Accelerating the deployment of digital technologies is crucial to improving the competitiveness, efficiency, and safety of the rail freight sector. Key digital innovations such as the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) and Digital Automatic Coupling (DAC) have the potential to transform rail freight

operations, enhancing capacity and interoperability across the EU. However, successful implementation requires coordinated investment and the involvement of the workforce including proper training and upskilling. The rollout of these technologies must be accompanied by systemic planning to ensure cost-effectiveness, maximize societal benefits, and avoid disruptions.

5. A Strong Railway Sector Cooperation

Greater cross-border cooperation and harmonization in rail capacity management are critical for the sector's progress, alongside fostering competition. Fragmentation in procedures and technical standards across Member States continues to hamper the efficiency of rail freight operations. More consistent and streamlined capacity management practices across the EU are necessary to support cross-border services, interoperability, and a genuinely European rail freight network capable of supporting the EU's climate neutrality and market integration goals.

CER Executive Director Alberto Mazzola said *"Following CER's Manifesto On Track for Europe, this document strengthens the case for a balanced framework to boost rail freight's competitiveness within the EU. Our agreement with ETF highlights not only the success of social dialogue but equally our shared commitment to improving the conditions for rail freight to thrive".*

ETF Secretary General Livia Spera said *"Rail freight's success relies on its workers. Social dialogue is crucial to ensuring fair wages, secure jobs, and safe working conditions. Investment in infrastructure must go hand in hand with investment in the workforce—sustainable transport cannot be built on precarious employment or cost-cutting at workers' expense".*

EU Social Dialogue Railway President Matthias Rohrmann said *"Rail freight in Europe is undergoing a decisive transformation that will positively impact railway sector employees if the right track is chosen. To achieve the goals of the new EU Commission's "Mobility at the Heart of Europe," and to meet green transition and climate targets, it is crucial to set the right course at both European and national levels—now! The EU social dialogue, involving railways, unions, and employers, is actively supporting the rail freight sector and emphasizing key actions that need urgent implementation. Together, they are sending a positive signal for a sustainable transport transition, benefiting enterprises, railway undertakings, and employees alike"*

EU Social Dialogue Railway Vice President Giorgio Tuti said *"Railway workers are essential to delivering a successful rail freight sector. To achieve a real modal shift, we need fair working conditions, secure jobs, and worker involvement in shaping the sector's future. Without skilled, well-supported workers, investments in infrastructure and technology will not be enough to meet Europe's climate and transport goals".*

CER contact

Cliona Cunningham
CER Head of Communications
E: cliona.cunningham@cer.be
M: +32 491 16 21 73

About CER

The Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER) brings together around 70 railway undertakings, their national associations as well as infrastructure managers and vehicle leasing companies. The membership is made up of long-established bodies, new entrants and both private and public enterprises, representing 79% of the rail network length, 77% of the rail freight business and about 90% of rail passenger operations in EU, EFTA and EU accession countries. CER

Joint ETF-CER Statement on the Train Drivers Directive

Brussels, 5 February 2025



represents the interests of its members towards EU policymakers and transport stakeholders, advocating rail as the backbone of a competitive and sustainable transport system in Europe. For more information, visit www.cer.be or follow us on X [@CER_railways](https://twitter.com/CER_railways) or [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/cer).

ETF contact

Rodrigo Rivera
ETF Senior Communications
Officer
r.rivera@etf-europe.org
M: (+32) 491372641

About ETF

The European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) represents over 5 million transport workers from more than 200 transport unions across Europe, from the European Union, the European Economic Area, and Central and Eastern Europe, in over 30 countries. ETF's work is driven by its vision for [Fair Transport](#): quality jobs with safe, reliable transport services for customers.

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