

Labour Day 2021- ETF Open Letter

The first of May is a day for workers and their unions to celebrate their achievements and unity.

We are the European Transport Workers' Federation, and on the eve of this important celebration, we want to remind you about the reality of transport work today in Europe.

Through this letter, we want to send a wake-up call on the need to act on the foundations of the transport sector in Europe. We are not asking you to answer us with the usual formal letter. We are urging you, European and national policy makers, to show political will and take action for Fair Transport.

For over a year now, the pandemic has affected transport workers for the worse. Planes have been grounded, buses and coaches have stopped, and the number of passengers on trains and ferries has dropped significantly.

In the meantime, what has happened to the women and men that are - literally - moving Europe forward? Many have lost their jobs. Those on precarious contracts, a very common feature in some transport modes, have lost everything as they are often not entitled to any safety net. For many, the future is uncertain.

Freight transport did not stop and, on the contrary, saw a sharp increase in volume. No need to repeat, once again, that medical and other essential supplies were delivered thanks to our hard-working colleagues. It is worth reminding that most transport workers did not get more than a 'thank-you' for working during the pandemic. Seafarers are still stuck at sea, far beyond the expiry of their contracts. Companies in logistics and e-commerce saw their profits soar over the last year. And yet, some of the sector's biggest players are going for redundancy plans and delocalisation to cheaper countries to increase their already sizeable profit margins.

The growing giants of logistics and e-commerce are where we see the strongest reluctance to engage in collective bargaining to negotiate fair working conditions and salaries. This is where precarious contracts and bogus self-employment are booming. Do governments really want to let those companies act in total isolation from the needs of society at large? All we get from them is a few thousand precarious jobs without any long-term engagement with local communities nor contribution to the common welfare. Are we ready to accept this? Are we really going to let them exploit our welfare state without asking them to contribute to it?

As European countries are making plans to support the recovery, there is an unprecedented opportunity ahead of us to change direction and put forward a robust, coherent and social vision on how we want transport to be.

You, as the policy makers, can take decisions that can make real change happen. It is your duty to act now and change the course of things. And in doing this, you should listen and involve transport workers' and their unions.

The debate around the recovery is dominated by the need to drive transport through the environmental transition. Transport workers agree with this. Practices that are harmful to the environment are often based on social dumping. We have plenty of examples in both freight and passenger transport. That is why plans to make transport greener must be designed alongside measures to make it fairer to workers.

Boosting public transport in Europe is central to the green recovery. At the same time, we see that many of our unions are fighting just to have meaningful social dialogue and renew collective bargaining agreements for workers who never stopped working and suffered high levels of infections at work. Is this the future public transport we want? How can we boost public transport if those workers who make it possible are denied decent working conditions and living wages?

Acting on price by internalising external costs, not only environmental but also social, is crucial to make the sector more accountable. If we want to make transport sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms, we can't allow tickets to travel around Europe to cost less than a sandwich, we can't allow parcels to be delivered at no cost, and we can't allow the price of transport to be established unilaterally by a bunch of shippers. Cheap transport has nothing to do with democratisation despite what some are advertising. On the contrary, cheap transport is about impoverishing transport workers and jeopardising their working conditions.

Progress is being made to link transport price to environmental costs, and we very much welcome this. And if we can do it for environmental protection, then there's no reason why can't we do it for workers too.

It is time to stop talking and start acting. Instead of blaming each other, national and European decision-makers must get together to achieve Fair Transport now!

Livia SPERA
ETF General Secretary

Frank MOREELS
ETF President

European Transport Workers' Federation | Galerie Agora, Rue du Marché aux Herbes 105, BTE 11, B-1000 Brussels

+32 2 285 46 60 | etf@etf-europe.org | etf-europe.org

Frank Moreels, President | Livia Spera, Acting General Secretary | Ekaterina Yordanova - Jan Villadsen, Vice Presidents