



Contribution on behalf of the European Transport Workers' Federation ETF
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The ETF welcomes the communication as being a positive contribution to the development of inland navigation as an integrated and sustainable element in the European transport system. It further welcomes the recognition of the contribution made by personnel in the development and future of inland navigation and is in broad agreement with the analyses presented in the communication. We in particular welcome the recognition that “improved working are social conditions are of imperative importance in attracting the workforce”. We are however disappointed that the Findings Paper proposes little as how to improve the situation of work quality.

Training

The close interaction of small-scale highly-skilled crews with e.g. management, terminals and customers is vital to the success of operations. As the report points out «new and other skills» are today requisite to the skills portfolio of a modern crew-member, including «proficiency in business management, ICT, linguistic and social skills». These new skills may not, however, be developed at the cost of the traditional nautical skills which must be retained. But how is this basic and life-long learning to be encouraged and supported? The need is for a rapid definition of training needs and of the financial requirements at national and community levels as well as of the funding sources.

Career opportunities

Of great and growing concern to the unions is the situation with regard to apprenticeships. The changes to crewing regulations made by the CCNR allowing the inclusion of apprentices in the minimum manning level did not, in our view, address the key question. This was not, how to make training cheaper and offer more places, but rather how to attract young people into the industry and then to retain them. At the moment the retention of personnel in inland navigation is hindered by several factors affecting the well-being of crew members and the attractiveness of the careers in inland navigation.

Crewing from Central and Eastern Europe

The now most common way of filling labour shortages is by employing skilled crew members from Central and Eastern Europe – or even further afield. We support the mobility of labour within a European inland waterways network as a traditional factor of the industry. But in contrast to the earlier situation these employees, often employed by manning agencies, are not generally employed at western European salary levels, but often at so-called market rates, sometimes declaring themselves to be self-employed. Further they work on a near casual basis, i.e. working for a few weeks on one ship and then moving on to the next, often with no rest period between. Needless to say, this is only a short term solution for the needs of inland navigation, for as living costs rise in the new member states and fewer new entrants are recruited there, so will the price of labour rise as skills become rarer. We believe that we need European minimum salaries and socially acceptable permanent employment. We note and approve the comments of the communication on labour mobility and on the harmonisation of job profiles.

Working time and social dislocation

Annual working time is high and is accompanied by long presence times and long periods away from home. In the ongoing social dialogue we are aiming at a significant reduction of annual working time in order to bring the industry into line with the EU's working time directive.

Working and living conditions

As is evident from the statistics attached to the report the average age of dry cargo vessels is nearly 40 years and of tankers some 30 years. In the leading fleets of Europe these ages rise to nearly 50 years. Even allowing for space created by smaller crews, the living conditions on board many vessels are not compatible with modern expectations. The quality of living space is also a factor working against a growing employment of women. A further factor is that modern sea terminals are today situated far from city centres with limited access to social facilities, a problem shared with seafarers.

Social security

Given the high level of mobility demonstrated by crew members the question of social security plays an increasingly important role as they grow older. The CCNR provides a good example of how this problem can be dealt with the its social security institution CASS which acts not only as an administrative centre but also as a place where crew members can lodge their concerns and complaints.

Small-scale enterprises

Whilst recognising the role played by small scale and family enterprises these too often act as employers and cannot be exempted from general rulings in order to encourage entrepreneurship.

Hotel ships

The hotel sector is a growing area of employment for bargemen and for employment from Eastern and Central Europe. The general observations for cargo vessels also apply here with the proviso that attention needs to be given to the legislation covering employment and living on such vessels. We are also concerned about the level of salaries and the quality of employment practices for the hotel and catering staff, who are mainly women from south-eastern and eastern Europe on seasonal contracts.

Framework structure

The ETF also identifies the creation of a pan-European framework for inland waterways as being a priority. The existing bodies have done valuable work but have certain deficiencies in the social aspect. Any future framework must also have competencies not only in technical but also in social and labour-related matters, an area where we also hope to see "added value". Its workings and membership must be open to third states and it could also have responsibility for such projects as

- social dialogue (a sensitive process considering the complex employment structures), as the appropriate body for matters concerning working time, professional qualifications and the enforcement of social legislation or
- a socio-economic observatory

Control

All of the harmonisation in terms of legislation, social insurance and qualifications presupposes effective and harmonised control bodies. We need measures to help the water police fulfil new tasks.

But how should we proceed? The International Agreement on the Working Conditions of Rhine Boatmen provides for a tripartite commission to annually national reports and consider what steps may need to be taken. This is a good basis, but current developments in the maritime sector go further. At the moment a major conference at the ILO in Geneva is drawing up a consolidated maritime convention, bringing together the essential elements of existing conventions.

This work enjoys the support of the EU-delegations, Norway, Iceland, Rumania and Bulgaria – a position we find encouraging. The future convention will encompass standards, regulations and guidelines on minimum requirements for seafarers, conditions of employment, accommodation, health protection, welfare, social security and enforcement. It also envisages the creation of a maritime labour certificate and a declaration of maritime labour compliance.

If this form of regulation is acceptable for one internationalised form of water transport then it must also be acceptable for inland navigation, where we are also faced with flags of convenience (Madeira, Malta, Cambodia, Liberia). The presence of these flag states widens the already great variety of employment legislation which confront employees.

We will therefore address ourselves in the near future to governments, the commission and our social partners to examine the feasibility of such a project with some urgency in order to help inland navigation offer stable, decent and progressive employment conditions.