

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

ITF campaign to make containers safe across the transport chain

THE CONTAINER

Many of the goods we buy and use make their way to us on boats, trucks and trains packed in a container.

The first container was invented in 1957 by Malcom P. McLean. His idea was based on 'intermodalism', whereby the same container, with the same cargo, could be transported via different transport modes without its contents being unloaded and repacked. It would replace previous methods of transporting goods in barrels, sacks and wooden crates and meant that cargo could move seamlessly between ships, trucks and trains. Its real genius was the standardised twist-lock mechanism that made it easy to stack and lift.

Containers have changed the global face of transport and world trade. There are now around 34.5 million containers in the world and that number is growing year by year.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

From the sea, containers pass through ports across the globe and are forwarded on by rail, road and inland waterways.

One ship could carry cargo that includes everything from baby food to TVs, motorbikes and clothes. They can also carry hazardous chemicals, flammable gases and scrap material. The peculiar thing about containers is that, most of the time, most transport workers and the general public have no way of being sure what's inside because the contents could have been mis-declared. They also may not know how the cargo has been secured as containers are sealed at the point of packing (commonly called 'stuffing') and not opened until they reach their final destination.

RISK AND DANGER

Despite its global nature, there are surprisingly few regulations on how containers should be packed, loaded and transported.

Incorrect packing, loading, weighing and transportation of containers poses a huge potential risk for the thousands of workers and members of the public who come into contact with them along their journey round the world.

Incorrect packing of **dangerous goods** has the potential to cause leakages, fires and even explosions. Drivers and road users are also at risk due to **overloaded** containers or **shifting cargo as a result of unstable loads**, causing trucks to leave the road with disastrous results. A container that is completely filled by cargo, such as scrap material, can present a serious danger to those who are required to inspect or unload it.

There have been incidents where the actual **weight** of the container exceeds the safe working load. This can potentially cause damage to the ship crane and in some cases containers can fall from the gantry crane, posing a significant risk to workers in the port. Rail wagons may be prone to derailments as a result of **poor load distribution** in the container or **overweight** cargo falling through the bottom of containers. The **misdeclaration of the weight and contents** of containers is also a problem causing vessels and trucks to be unevenly loaded. According to the TT Club, leading maritime insurers, as many as two thirds of accidents involving the loss or damage of containerised cargo at



sea are likely to have been caused by improper packing and securing of cargo inside the unit. This could include the sinking of ships which release containers into the sea. Those that do not sink stay just below the surface posing a great danger to other ships. The unknown contents of containers mean that there can be other environmental damage. Thousands of containers are lost overboard each year. The loss from the MOL Comfort alone, which sank in 2013, was 4,293 containers.

Fumigation of containers in order to protect contents during transportation or toxic gases and vapours released from the products packed inside the container affect all workers in the transport chain including drivers and warehouse workers.

Not only is there a lack of regulation on the safe transportation of containers, in many countries, trailer truck drivers are often unaware of the content or weight of the containers they are carrying. They have no way of making sure that the cargo is correctly packed. In the event of an accident, they do not have the information they need to reduce the risk of injury, explosion or other hazard. Yet when accidents happen, the road transport company and the driver are often held fully responsible.

REAL EXAMPLES

Many incidents in transport are attributed to poor practices in the packing of cargo transport units, including inadequate securing of the cargo, overloading and mis-declaration of contents.

A survey conducted by ITF Japanese affiliate Zenkowan revealed that during a period of ten years starting in 1998, 175 overturn accidents occurred, killing 13 people. More recent research has identified 28 incidents on Japanese roads in four years (2006-09 inclusive)¹. Most of these accidents are caused by shifting cargo, overloading, inadequate documentation, or hazardous or dangerous goods.

In 2011, three refrigeration mechanics were killed on the dockside in separate incidences in Brazil and Vietnam when the containers they were working on exploded.

Overloading and the lack of proper securing of cargo on board the MV Sewol – a South Korean ferry which capsized in April 2014 killing 296 people – have been included in the direct causes for the sinking of the ferry. The vessel is reported to have been carrying three times the cargo weight limit. It is reported that the ship owners ignored the off-duty captain's warnings that the ship should not carry so much cargo because she would not be stable.

Investigation into the sinking of the MSC Napoli off the British coast in 2007 found that 20% of its containers were more than 3 tonnes different from their declared weights. The largest was 20 tonnes and the total weight of the 137 containers was 312 tonnes heavier than on the cargo manifest.

Of course, these accidents are only those that have been reported to the unions or in the media. There may have been many other unreported cases.

GLOBAL LOBBYING

For a number of years, the ITF and its affiliates have been raising awareness of these issues and unions around the world are campaigning on the safety issues and potential dangers of unregulated container transport.

There is some movement on the issues, where global attempts are being made to regulate the packing, weighing and checking of containers. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Maritime Organization (IMO) and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) adopted guidelines known as a Code of Practice

¹ ILO report (2011): *Safety in the supply chain in relation to packing of containers*

on packing of cargo transport units in 2014. This can be used by governments to translate into national legislation. They are also looking at training on packing of containers. At the IMO, tentative measures have been taken to ensure the verification of container weight declarations. However, further work is needed to implement changes to international law and to mitigate the risks involved.

The ITF continues to lobby at a global level on this issue.

ILO/IMO/UNECE CODE OF PRACTICE (COP) ON PACKING OF CARGO TRANSPORT UNITS (CTUS)

In 2011, the ILO held a global dialogue forum (GDF) on safety in the supply chain in relation to containers. The ITF attended through its delegation of representatives of road, rail, seafarer and dockers' unions. It was agreed that an ILO/IMO/UNECE COP on the packing of CTUs (to be developed from the revision of the existing 1997 guidelines) was necessary. The COP sets out practical guidelines on the issue, including packing and securing (including for dangerous goods), safe handling, receipt and unpacking. It also addresses training and contains a section on the chain of responsibility. Whilst the COP will be a voluntary instrument, it will be written in a language that governments can adopt as legislation. It will also cover the entire supply chain which will be vital for its successful implementation. The COP was approved in 2014 by the relevant bodies of the IMO, ILO and UNECE.

http://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS_356987/lang--en/index.htm

SAFETY OF LIFE AT SEA CONVENTION (SOLAS)

In May 2014, the IMO Safety Committee approved amendments to the SOLAS convention that will introduce a mandatory requirement for the certification of container weights prior to loading on board an export vessel. They are expected to enter into force in July 2016.

LOCAL CAMPAIGNING

ITF unions are also taking a stand locally. In early 2014, as a reaction to four fatal explosions due to counterfeit refrigerant gases being used, the ILWU on the West Coast of the USA secured a local agreement on the testing of reefer containers in their terminals. The union worked with federal and local bodies to establish a process whereby 24 reefer containers per terminal, per month, are subjected to a flame halide test on a sample of the gas. This has led to the isolation of tens of containers in a very short space of time. The union is now working to expand this agreement.

In the Netherlands, FNV Bondgenoten has been campaigning on fumigation and toxic gases in containers for a number of years. The union has utilised existing legislation as a tool to focus on the problem, resulting in improvements to existing provisions and development of protocol to address the issues at workplace level. BTB in Belgium has been successful in getting clauses on toxic gases in containers and the requirements on employers included in its collective agreements for the transport and logistics sector.

National Chain of Responsibility (CoR) Regulations were enacted in Australia in 2005 following interventions by trade unions, including the Transport Workers' Union of Australia (TWU). The regulations extend the general responsibility and legal liability for ensuring that the container is safe along the complete transport chain - to the consignors, packers, loaders and most importantly, the clients rather than pursuing the truck drivers and operators. It requires that all members of the chain ensure that road freight is moved within the legal driving hours, that dangerous goods are clearly declared, that mass and dimension limits are defined and adhered to, and that appropriate load restraints (lashing) are used.

This kind of local campaigning linked with the global lobbying is what will bring about change.

CONTAINER SAFETY – WHAT’S IN THE BOX? – THE ITF CAMPAIGN

Seafarers, port workers, truck drivers, railway workers and those that pack, load and unload the containers clearly have a common interest in ensuring the safety of the containers they handle.

While different aspects of container safety may be the focus for workers in different transport sectors, it is important that container safety is addressed in its entirety. Seamless global safety standards and national legislation can ensure safe transport of cargo across the various modes.

Establishment of responsibilities and the interlinking of players in the supply chain will also have an impact on safety across the chain.

The ITF is committed to ensuring that workers who deal with containers are as safe as they can be while on the job. Following several years of joint work by the ITF Road Transport Workers’, Railway Workers’, Dockers’ and Seafarers’ Sections, the ITF is leading a cross-sectional campaign on container safety.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

Container safety is a supply chain issue and our campaign is for safety and responsibility along the supply chain. This should start from where the containers are packed and sealed. We are concerned with the misdeclaration of contents, including dangerous goods and weight, fumigation and toxic gases in containers, and the improper packing of containers.

So far, only voluntary measures are in place but this ‘best practice’ approach has not solved the problem in a satisfactory way. We are therefore seeking international regulations (through adoption of the SOLAS amendment and ILO/IMO/UNECE COP), as well as recognition and implementation of these standards at national level.

All those involved in the transport and handling of containers along the supply chain need to be fully informed of the contents, actual weight, state of packing, stowage, lashing and securing of the cargo including the eccentricity of the centre of gravity (CG) of the loaded container and the possible existence of toxic fumigants and vapours or existence of dangerous substances in the container.

General responsibility and legal liability for ensuring that the container is safely transported needs to be extended to include all those along the supply chain.

Ultimately, by ensuring the safe transport of containers wherever they are used, we expect a reduction of accidents involving containers.

Through organising workers involved in the transport and handling of containers, the ITF and its unions will be in a strong position to campaign for these demands and ensure that containers are transported safely.

For more information about the ITF campaign on container safety or to let us know what your union is doing on this issue:



www.itfcontainersafety.org



www.facebook.com/itfglobal



[@itfglobalunion](https://twitter.com/itfglobalunion)

or email: containersafety@itf.org.uk

Let’s fight back together to turn the tide in favour of the workers.

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