

Brussels, April 2, 2026

Open Letter to President Ursula von der Leyen Europe's transport system is unprepared — and workers are paying the price

The consequences of the Iran conflict and Gulf escalation are not an isolated geopolitical shock. They are yet another stress test that the European Union risks failing.

Once again, Europe's transport system is structurally unprepared. Transport workers are – again – at risk of bearing the consequences of the constantly deteriorating terms and conditions across the transport modes. There is no better excuse to cut down on labour and social rights than a crisis.

This is the result of years of deliberate political choices that have triggered intra-EU competition based on cost-cutting, which exposed—rather than protected—European players to unfair international competition, which led to fragmented governance, and created dependence on third countries for passenger connectivity and freight services, instead of prioritising resilience, public investment, and quality jobs.

Despite repeated commitments to preparedness, the EU failed to build the necessary tools to protect its transport system and workers in times of crisis.

Short-term measures—subsidies, tax relief, and emergency support—are repeatedly used to contain immediate damage. While necessary, they do not address the underlying problem. Each crisis leaves the sector weaker, more fragile, and less attractive to workers.

This trajectory is unsustainable.

The European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) calls on the European Commission to act immediately on three non-negotiable priorities: adopting binding, cross-sector crisis and safety frameworks for all transport sectors that include a strong worker dimension; guaranteeing that crises are not managed through downward pressure on jobs, wages, and working conditions; in consultation with social partners, come up with robust transport preparedness strategies that guarantee all necessary ingredients for resilient EU transport systems.

To kick off this process, the EC should convene, without delay, a high-level roundtable to deliver a structural resilience strategy focused on long-term systemic change.

Workers are on the frontline — EU protection is not

Transport workers are systematically treated as an afterthought in crisis response, despite often being on the frontline.

Airspace closures, sudden disruptions in routes and corridors and escalating security risks are no longer exceptional disruptions—they are becoming structural realities. Workers are expected to absorb these shocks in increasingly unpredictable and high-risk conditions.

The EU must urgently establish binding and enforceable safety frameworks and contingency plans across all modes of transport, deploy real-time and coordinated risk assessment systems at the EU level, and ensure clear, harmonised crisis protocols that apply across borders and sectors, including for EU transport assets and workers beyond the EU borders. Failure to act will deepen staff shortages and further undermine the sector's operational capacity.

A recurring pattern: profits protected, workers exposed

The current fuel crisis is following a familiar pattern.

When operating costs rise, companies adjust rapidly by reducing operational capacities, reducing labour costs, and shifting risks onto workers.

In aviation, airlines are already grounding fleets or preparing to do so, leading to reduced flying hours, loss of income, and increased job insecurity. Ground staff and the wider workforce inevitably follow.

At the same time, workers face rising living costs across the board. They are being squeezed from both sides.

This is not crisis management. It is a transfer of risk from companies to workers.

If this continues, the sector will accelerate its loss of skilled labour—undermining both recovery and long-term resilience. This dynamic was already evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is likely to repeat itself.

No more quick fixes! Structural action required!

With every new crisis, one thing becomes clear: the EU is still managing symptoms instead of addressing structural failures.

Temporary financial support for companies will not resolve long-standing issues such as deteriorating working conditions, increasing instability for workers, persistent safety gaps, dependence on third countries for connectivity and freight transport, energy vulnerability, and infrastructure deficits.

Without structural reform, each crisis will deepen these weaknesses.

Energy dependence: a known and unaddressed vulnerability

From the war in Ukraine to the current Iran conflict and Gulf escalation, Europe has repeatedly been reminded that fossil fuel dependence is a strategic weakness.

Yet progress toward energy independence remains inconsistent.

Energy transition is not optional; it is a matter of economic security and geopolitical autonomy. Recent slowdowns and policy hesitation risk reversing hard-won progress.

The challenge doesn't lie in how ambitious the transition is, but the failure to make it socially and economically credible. Well-funded initiatives to support a just transition for workers and citizens, combined with targeted measures linking clean technologies and fuels to quality jobs, must be part of the solution. At the same time, action is needed to address business models that rely on cost-cutting rather than innovation.

The debate must resume on the basis of a fundamentally redefined narrative—one grounded in large-scale public investment, a direct link between decarbonisation and quality employment, and strong support for workers and affected communities.

Seafarers: exposed to risk, failed by coordination

Seafarers operating in affected regions are facing escalating dangers, including longer routes, extended time at sea, and heightened exposure to security threats. At the time of writing, more than 20000 seafarers, many of whom are either EU nationals or on board EU-owned ships, are stranded due to the ongoing conflict.

Yet the European response remains disjointed and insufficient. The absence of coordinated European safety corridors, reliable emergency repatriation mechanisms, and clear, enforceable protection standards represents a structural failure.

Ad hoc responses are not protection; they are signs of unpreparedness.

Aviation: unfair competition and regulatory gaps

European aviation operates in a distorted competitive environment.

EU carriers are subject to higher regulatory and labour standards while competing with operators benefiting from less stringent requirements. At the same time, loopholes within the EU framework allow internal market distortions to persist.

This dual imbalance weakens European operators, undermines labour standards, and increases external dependency. Addressing this is not protectionism—it is a matter of strategic sovereignty and fair competition.

Rail policy has weakened a strategic asset

For over two decades, EU policy choices—including liberalisation and restrictions on public investment—have weakened the rail sector.

This crisis makes the consequences visible. Rail should be a cornerstone of Europe's resilience, offering electrified, lower-energy transport alternatives. Instead, it enters this crisis underfunded, understaffed, and operationally constrained.

We warn that if energy prices continue to soar, this will once again reduce its competitiveness versus other modes. Rail's major advantage is electrification, and its ability to run on renewables if they are sufficiently available in the network. However, due to its current state caused by underinvestment in infrastructure, deterioration of working conditions and massive job cuts, it is doubtful that rail can sustain a new energy crisis.

Road sector: time to modernise

For the road, this is yet another fuel crisis, but road transport workers have actually been in a state of crisis for many years.

Appalling working conditions, excessive working hours, low wages, and prolonged periods away from home have led to massive driver shortages in both road freight and passenger transport. It happened before, it will happen again! That is why this fuel crisis should be a wake-up call for policymakers and industry!

Vehicle fleets have to be modernised, drivers must be adequately involved in this transition and properly trained, and if any EU financial support to operators is needed, this should be conditional on strong compliance with applicable social and market laws.

What is more, without structural changes to the business model—such as reducing complex subcontracting chains and addressing fixed-price contracts—there is no realistic pathway to ensure that subsidies or financial support effectively support the transition.

Public transport: still not treated as a priority

The crisis also exposes the inefficiency of a system overly reliant on private transport.

Without accessible and affordable public transport, workers in rural and peri-urban areas have no viable alternative to private mobility. Investment in public and collective transport remains insufficient and uneven across regions.

This is a strategic gap that continues to be ignored.

A call for immediate political responsibility

The ETF therefore calls on President von der Leyen and the European Commission to take immediate responsibility and convene a high-level roundtable bringing together the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament, Member States, and social partners in transport. This must not be a symbolic exercise.

This is not an isolated crisis, nor were the ones preceding it. This is facing a pattern of predictable shocks for which Europe remains insufficiently prepared.

And in this context, transport workers are consistently expected to absorb the consequences.

The European Commission must now act—decisively, structurally, and without delay. A resilient transport system requires political choices. So far, those choices have fallen short.