

“Any fool can stuff a container?”: ILO to discuss safety in growing container industry

The container shipping market represents about 16 per cent of the world's goods loaded in tonnes. With its growing market share, the risk of accidents also increases, says a report prepared for an ILO Global Dialogue Forum on Safety in the Supply Chain in Relation to Packing of Containers, to be held in Geneva on 21-22 February 2011. The meeting will try to find a common approach throughout the supply chain to ensure the application of the appropriate standards for packing containers.

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On April 26, 1956, a crane lifted 58 aluminium truck bodies aboard an aging tanker ship moored in Newark, New Jersey. Five days later, the Ideal-X sailed into Houston, where 58 trucks waited to take on the metal boxes and haul them to their destinations. Such was the beginning of a revolution.

From these modest beginnings, the concept developed by Malcolm McLean has developed into a huge international industry that powers global trade. Fifty-four years later, the 24-ft long aluminium truck bodies have evolved into 20-, 40- and 45-ft long international freight containers, capable of carrying nearly 30 tonnes of cargo and supporting up to nine similarly loaded containers.

The container shipping market represents about 16 per cent of the world's goods loaded in tonnes. Despite the turbulence of the financial markets in 2007, growth throughout the top 100 container ports increased overall by 6.4 per cent in 2008.

The use of containers continues to grow – and a greater proportion of them than ever is carrying cargoes from China to the United States and Europe. The majority of these containers are from established shippers with sophisticated despatch facilities, who understand the stresses and forces to which containers are subjected throughout the supply chain.

The risks of the trade

However, there is also evidence that many accidents in the sector are attributed to poor practices in relation to packing of containers, including overloading.

“If you think any fool can stuff a container, think again. One in six container journeys results in damaged cargo. Many incidents are caused, or made worse, by bad packing. Losses exceed \$5 billion a year, according to the United Kingdom P&I Club, one of the oldest protection and indemnity insurers worldwide”, says Marios Meletiou, the ILO's Senior Ports and Transports Specialist, adding that “this has caused major concern particularly because the victims of accidents attributed to poor practices in packing containers can be the general public, transport workers, or their employers, who have no control over the packing of containers”.

The report for the ILO Forum stresses the need to find ways to capture the often “remote” players in the industry and ensure that they fully abide to good practice guidelines.

It also warns that many organizations involved in packing containers may not fully understand the need for the effective loading and securing of cargoes. In a number of cases in which cargoes have moved, there is evidence to suggest that the packers who stuffed the containers did not appreciate to what extent containers can move and how forces change as they proceed along the supply chain.

Videos like *Any fool can stuff a container*, produced by the United Kingdom P&I Club mentioned earlier, provide simple and easy-to-understand information about some elements of the packing process, but they do not entirely explain the consequences of improper securing.

Need for proper training programmes

“For a better understanding of the forces, packers should be invited to participate in interactive training programmes that are readily accessible and appropriate. It would also be relevant to examine whether there

is a need for accredited certification to demonstrate a candidate's successful completion of the course", explains Marios Meletiou.

A good example for such a training programme is the ILO Portworker Development Programme (PDP) which includes two specific training units on packing containers.

The development of packing and good practice guidelines and an accompanying training programme will only be successful if packing organizations and others implement the recommendations. The ILO Forum will therefore also consider the means by which they are disseminated: voluntarily good practice guidelines or the enactment of specific legislation, which would require packing organizations to comply with it.

"The ILO report shows that there are a multitude of stakeholders in the various sectors involved in the supply chain. An analysis of these findings demonstrates that the stowage and securing of goods, the establishment of responsibilities and implementation of rules, regulations and best practice, as well as the interlinking of all the players in the supply chain and communication (or lack thereof), will all have an impact on safety in the industry", concludes Alette van Leur, Director of the ILO's Sectoral Activities Department.