

## German container ports hit by two-day 'warning' strikes



*Hamburg is Europe's third-largest container port behind Rotterdam and Antwerp. Photo credit: HHM / Michael Lindner.*

**Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Jul 10, 2024, 10:05 AM EDT**

Strikes are underway in Germany's main container ports that are already under pressure from early peak season demand, bringing ship handling to a standstill and heavily disrupting the onward movement of cargo.

Port workers in Hamburg, Bremen and Wilhelmshaven walked out Tuesday and Wednesday amid a long-running dispute over wages, with some of the full-shift strikes due to extend into Thursday.

The strike action was called by German union ver.di to increase pressure on port employers before the fourth round of collective bargaining negotiations between

ver.di and the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS) scheduled for Thursday and Friday in Bremen.

“In the third round of negotiations, we were still far apart,” ver.di negotiator Maren Ulbrich said in a statement Wednesday. “The offer presented by the employers is not acceptable to us. The expansion of the warning strikes will now send another very clear signal to the employers that the employees are serious about their demands.”

A spokesperson for Hamburg’s largest terminal operator, HHLA, said operations at the port were on hold until Thursday morning. Hamburg is Europe’s third-largest container port behind Rotterdam and Antwerp.

“The terminals are already working on resuming operations [Thursday] morning and plan to compensate the delays as quickly as possible in the coming days,” the spokesperson told the *Journal of Commerce*.

HHLA subsidiary Metrans warned customers “to expect significant delays on all import and export services between the hinterland and the ports of Hamburg and Bremerhaven.

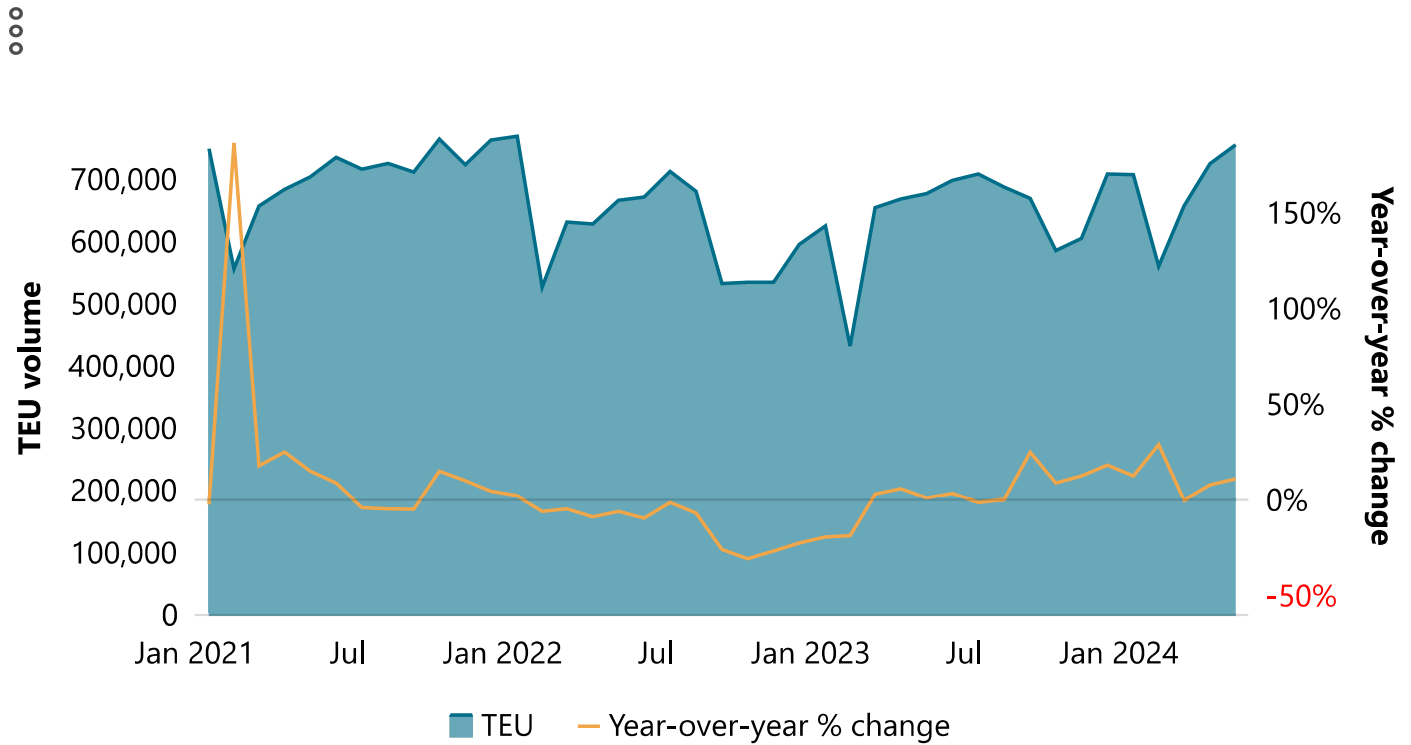
“Unfortunately, we are not able to influence the consequences of these outages in any way,” the Metrans advisory added.

A spokesperson for Hapag-Lloyd said the carrier was expecting delays of 48 hours in Hamburg because of the strike action there.

“We are currently working on different measures to maintain the throughput of the terminals and counter delays in the ports, such as service rotation changes, prioritization of export-oriented vessels, or adaptations of destinations in our empty container steering,” the official told the *Journal of Commerce*.

## China to North Europe volume rises steeply through May

Container volume from China to North Europe measured in TEUs with year over year change



Source: Container Trades Statistics

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6M	1Y	YTD	MAX
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Maersk told customers its affected vessels would “observe the duration of the strike and recover the impact when service resumes fully,” but warned that with the negotiations ongoing between the union and port employers, the situation was subject to change at short notice.

The strikes could hit schedule reliability that up to May, the latest data available, has been down significantly compared with last year. On-time performance on the Asia-North Europe trade in May was at 48.6%, a slight improvement on the previous month but still 19 percentage points down year over year, according to the latest data from Sea-Intelligence Maritime Analysis.

Data from maritime visibility platform eeSea shows the on-time performance of vessels on Asia-North Europe deteriorated from average delays of 3.6 days recorded in the first three months of the year to 4.6 days in the second quarter.

## Long-running battle

Ver.di has been engaged in a long-running battle to increase the wages of its workers that it says have been eroded by persistently high inflation since the pandemic and have yet to recover from missing an increase in shift allowances in the 2022 collective agreement. The union has threatened more strike action if negotiations for a new deal do not progress.

The effects of the strike in Hamburg and Bremerhaven will be amplified, considering terminals in the ports are already handling strong import demand as the peak season on the Asia-North Europe trade gets off to an early start. The latest volume data from Container Trades Statistics (CTS) shows that China-North Europe volume in May was up 11.6% at 757,600 TEUs.

The head of ocean freight for a global forwarder told the *Journal of Commerce* this week that their demand from Asia to North Europe has continued to grow into the third quarter.

“We have seen an 8% growth in our volume in the first five months [of 2024],” the source said. “June was our best month in volume terms this year and July will be even better.”

Congestion at ports in Europe and Asia is a contributing factor to soaring rate levels, and the port strikes in northern Germany will likely add to the supply chain factors driving up prices.

Spot rates from Asia to North Europe and the Mediterranean were at \$8,030 per FEU and \$7,830 per FEU this week, up 148% and 88% year over year, respectively, according to rate benchmarking platform Xeneta.

“Given we ... already [saw] record-breaking volumes in May ahead of the traditional peak season in Q3, you can understand why shippers are so concerned,” Emily Stausbøll, senior shipping analyst for Xeneta, said in a market update Wednesday.

“The spot market is still climbing, the conflict in the Red Sea shows no signs of ending and the port congestion we are seeing in Asia and Europe will take time to de-pressurize,” she added.

In France, strikes to protest pension reforms have been ongoing, but a threat by trade unions to launch a “month of chaos” in July that would extend to workers in the main container hubs of Le Havre and Marseille-Fox has been delayed until September.

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