

Months of congestion ahead for North Europe ports: Antwerp-Bruges



Antwerp-Bruges overtook Rotterdam in the first quarter to become Europe's busiest port, handling 3.43 million TEUs against its Dutch rival's 3.36 million TEUs. Photo credit: Rudmer Zwerver / Shutterstock.com.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Jun 19, 2025, 10:13 AM EDT

BRUSSELS — North European ports will continue to face disruption and congestion “for many more months” with little improvement in the series of factors contributing to the ongoing bottlenecks, according to an executive with the port of Antwerp-Bruges.

Luc Arnouts, vice president of international relations and networks at Europe's busiest port, said container yards were full at the main hubs, ships were arriving outside their berthing windows, intermittent strikes at some ports were having a knock-on effect, carrier alliances were reshuffling capacity, and low water on the Rhine and delays in hinterland moves were all holding up traffic.

“Terminal occupancy is high in all the major ports so when ships do not arrive within their berthing window and arrive a day later, that disrupts the whole operation,” he told the CHAINge Europe supply chain conference here this week.

Strong demand for much of the year has kept North European ports under pressure, slowing attempts to mitigate the bottlenecks. The latest Asia-to-Europe volume data from Container Trades Statistics (CTS) is for April, when 1.64 million TEUs were transported westward, an increase of 8.6% year over year and a 6% gain from March.

In the first four months of 2025, total Asia-Europe volume was up 9% year over year at 6.13 million TEUs, with the Asia-North Europe segment rising 6.6%, to 3.72 million TEUs, and Asia-Mediterranean surging 12.14%, to 2.4 million TEUs, according to CTS.

Kuehne + Nagel’s SeaExplorer port visibility tool noted that port congestion in North European ports such as Antwerp, Hamburg and Bremerhaven was extending transit times with delays in berthing, operational disruptions and high yard utilization.

The platform reported that container yards in Antwerp-Bruges were at 100% and carriers were reporting waiting times of up to three days, with truck slots limited and fully booked early each day. Container yards at Bremerhaven, one of the hubs for Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd’s Gemini Cooperation, are currently at 85%, while some terminals in Rotterdam are reportedly at 80% utilization.

Michael Aldwell, Kuehne +Nagel’s executive vice president of sea logistics, said ports in southern Europe were also seeing congestion due to longer transits around the Cape of Good Hope as Mediterranean importers began to stock up earlier for the winter holiday sales season.

“There were lower inventories in Europe and stronger sales than importers expected,” he told the *Journal of Commerce* this week, with the reshuffling of alliances adding to the bottlenecks.

“When you’ve got the redeployment of the new alliances happening, you’re always going to have some initial operational challenges when things start arriving at different berthing windows, different setups,” he said. “And, of course, you have the traditional labor challenges,” he added.

Dockworker strikes add to port woes

Those labor challenges were coming on top of the high demand and operational challenges, with dockworker strikes continuing to impact European ports. A nationwide strike in Belgium on May 20 brought vessel traffic at the Port of Antwerp-

Bruges to a halt, further stretching the system. Another national “day of action” will be held by unions in Belgium on June 25.

Dockworker unions in Sweden launched strikes and blockade actions at multiple ports this week, with APM Terminals Gothenburg to be impacted on June 23 and 24.

“There is not much free space in in the system, so this all has a knock-on impact,” Arnouts said. “If you are at a high level of frequency, you can imagine that adds to the disruption, on top of the uncertainty over tariffs that create shocks in cargo flows.”

The latest data from Sea-Intelligence shows global schedule reliability has improved from 51.4% in January to 58.7% in April. Despite the steady improvement this year, Arnouts said it was too early to determine whether the better on-time performance was being seen in the port. He also highlighted a lack of transparency across the cargo supply chain that was a source of continuing frustration.

“When a container arrives at a container terminal, often we don’t know the next mode of transport,” he said. “Can you imagine that a container comes in, needs to go the next day on a barge to Basel or on a truck to Duisburg and often we don’t know that.

“There is so much communication in the supply chain but still we need to fight to get the right ETA [estimated time of arrival] of a ship that’s a part of the supply chain as well,” he added. “If you don’t know when the ship arrives, you don’t know what the next step will be.”

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