

Strikes, storms and record volumes adding to North Europe port delays



A series of strikes by port workers is disrupting terminal handling operations in the main French hub of Le Havre. Photo credit: Alexandre Prevot / Shutterstock.com.

Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe | Feb 11, 2025, 11:10 AM EST

The significant volumes of exports that left China in December are continuing to arrive at European ports, compounding existing congestion caused by a series of severe winter storms and labor action at key hubs.

Data from Container Trades Statistics (CTS) shows China-to-North Europe volume in December increased 17.6% year over year to a one-month record of 835,000 TEUs.

“CTS registers those volumes at the time of export, so these containers started arriving in Europe in the second half of January and into February given the current average transit time of around 45 days, contributing to increasing congestion,” Emily

Stausbøll, senior shipping analyst at rate benchmarking platform Xeneta, told the *Journal of Commerce*.

Barbara Eleota, senior vice president of ocean freight at DHL Global Forwarding Europe, said the high container volume would increase congestion at some European ports.

“Current delays in North Europe and UK ports, including five to seven days in Le Havre and up to a week in Belgium, are expected to worsen,” she told the *Journal of Commerce*.

“Customers may experience delays of up to a week, necessitating extended buffer windows in their planning. Ongoing disruptions, such as voided sailings, weather issues and labor challenges further affect scheduling consistency,” she added.

As arrival volume from China rises, strike action at Hutchison Port Delta II in Rotterdam over a new collective bargaining agreement is causing significant disruption, according to Maersk, with a temporary suspension of operations at the terminal adding to the existing congestion at Europe’s busiest port.

“Due to the strike action and slowdown of operations, there will be a reduced number of moves per hour conducted at the terminal for an unknown duration ... prolonging the time vessels are operated on and significantly disrupting their normal schedules,” Maersk said in a customer advisory Tuesday.

The carrier said it had contingency plans in place and may offer customers “alternative options” to the Rotterdam terminal.

Extreme weather from the Atlantic moved across the English Channel to mainland Europe in late January with multiple high wind warnings issued in Hamburg, Antwerp, Rotterdam, Le Havre and Dunkirk in addition to Felixstowe and Southampton. Cargo handling was suspended during the storms and terminals have been scrambling to catch up on the backlogs of containers.

Productivity ‘below par’

Kuehne + Nagel’s visibility platform SeaExplorer shows the seven-day average vessel waiting time at Rotterdam to be about two days, although carriers have reported wait times of up to seven days. Yard utilization at the port’s Europe Container Terminal is high, labor is under pressure and “productivity is below par,” SeaExplorer noted.

The number of vessels at anchorage waiting to enter Rotterdam currently stands at 11, up from six in the first week of January but down from 14 ships mid-month, according

to data from S&P Global Commodity Insights. S&P Global is the parent of *Journal of Commerce*.

Intermodal operator Contargo is reporting that the average waiting times for the handling of its barges were 76 hours in Rotterdam and 70 hours in Antwerp, while carriers are reporting feeders experiencing delays of 72 hours.

HMM is reporting wait times of up to three days at Bremerhaven, Algeciras and Genoa while Piraeus is seeing waiting times of 4.5 days for feeders.

In France, port workers this month are holding four-hour stoppages on 10 separate days ending Feb. 24 at container ports across the country, severely disrupting handling operations. A 48-hour country-wide strike is planned for Feb. 26–28.

French transport and logistics union TLF warned in a statement that the labor action this month was impacting the country's competitiveness, with more than 40% of containers destined for France now transiting through competing European ports such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Genoa.

Marc Meier, global head of ocean freight at Toll Group, told the *Journal of Commerce* that port congestion in North Europe “will get worse before it gets better.”

“However, despite the record numbers of container freight in December, it is not as high as the numbers we have seen during the peak season ... the ports should be able to cope,” Meier said, although adding that the port strikes in France would cause cargo bound for Le Havre and Marseilles to be shipped elsewhere.

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