

ETF appeal to the European Council: Protect seafarers and dock workers: Civilian maritime workers must never be targets

The European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF), representing seafarers and dock workers across Europe, strongly condemns the continued attacks on merchant vessels and maritime infrastructure, as well as the recent Russian attacks on Ukrainian ports.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, seafarers and dock workers have faced repeated attacks on ports, vessels and other civilian infrastructure. According to Ukrainian government figures published in September 2026, 1,173 port infrastructure facilities and 274 civilian vessels have been damaged or partially destroyed.

On 3 October, a strike on a merchant vessel in the Odesa region killed one seafarer and injured three others. On 6 October, the merchant vessels *Alfa Watan* and *Able* were struck in Bulgaria's Exclusive Economic Zone. The *Alfa Watan* sank, with its crew still missing, while all 18 crew of the *Able* were rescued, two with serious injuries. Responsibility for these latest incidents has not yet been conclusively established.

ETF expresses its solidarity with its Ukrainian affiliates, the seafarers and their families, and all maritime and port workers whose lives are endangered by the ongoing war and attacks on civilian shipping and port infrastructure.

Seafarers of many nationalities – including Ukrainian and Russian nationals - work aboard merchant vessels operating in European waters and across the world, often alongside one another. No seafarer should be held responsible for the actions of their government or exposed to danger because of their nationality.

Seafarers and dock workers are civilians, not combatants. They must never be targets.

Merchant vessels, ports and civilian maritime infrastructure must be protected in accordance with international law. Attacks that endanger civilian crews and port workers are unacceptable.

Ahead of the European Council meeting on 15–16 October, ETF calls on EU leaders, the European Commission, Member States and all relevant national and international authorities to take immediate action to protect civilian maritime workers and restore safe navigation in the Black Sea. In particular, ETF calls on the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States to ensure:

1. **Urgent protection for seafarers and vessels.** All necessary measures must be taken to prevent further attacks on merchant ships, safeguard crews and ensure that civilian vessels can navigate safely. The security of a vessel must never be considered separately from the lives of the people on board.

2. **Immediate and coordinated search-and-rescue efforts.** Every possible effort must be made to locate and rescue missing seafarers, provide assistance to those affected and ensure that rescue operations continue for as long as there remains a reasonable possibility of saving lives. The families of missing and deceased seafarers must receive timely information and appropriate support.
3. **Protection of dock workers and port personnel.** Authorities and port operators must ensure that workers in ports and related maritime facilities are protected against attacks, including through effective risk assessments, emergency preparedness, access to reliable safety information and appropriate protective measures. Particular attention must be paid to Ukrainian ports, where workers continue to face repeated attacks.
4. **Safe working conditions and the right to safety.** Seafarers and dock workers must not be expected to work in conditions where risks to their lives cannot be adequately mitigated. Employers, flag States, port States and relevant authorities must fulfil their responsibilities to protect workers. Workers must be able to exercise their applicable rights to refuse or withdraw from work presenting serious and imminent danger without retaliation.
5. **Safe passage and respect for international law.** The EU and its Member States must step up diplomatic and coordinated action to restore safe passage for merchant shipping in the Black Sea, protect civilian maritime infrastructure and uphold applicable international humanitarian and maritime law. Attacks on civilian vessels and port infrastructure must be investigated and those responsible for unlawful attacks held accountable.
6. **Meaningful involvement of workers' representatives.** Trade unions representing seafarers and dock workers, including ETF's Ukrainian affiliates, must be consulted on measures affecting their safety, working conditions and operations in high-risk areas. Workers must receive timely and reliable information about security threats and the measures available to protect them.

The security of maritime transport cannot be measured solely in terms of vessels, cargo or trade flows. It must be measured in terms of human lives. Every seafarer and dock worker has the right to return home safely.

ETF calls on the European Council to put the protection of seafarers and dock workers at the centre of its response to the attacks on civilian shipping in the Black Sea. Our Ukrainian affiliates and their members need action, not another declaration of concern.

ETF Seafarers and ETF Dockers stand united with their Ukrainian colleagues in demanding safe seas, secure ports and the protection of all maritime workers.

Brussels, 13 October 2026