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Dutch port workers want to retire healthy

Given that port workers work shifts, under high pressure and in arduous working conditions, many of them are totally worn out before they reach pensionable age – and on average they die six years earlier. Port workers need to retire earlier if they are to enjoy a healthy old age. That's the aim of the Dutch trade union FNV Havens.

Pien Heuts
Journalist

1. <https://www.gezondheidsraad.nl/documenten/adviezen/2017/10/24/gezondheidsrisicos-door-nachtwerk>

Port of Rotterdam

The Port of Rotterdam is Europe's biggest seaport and ranks eleventh in the world for container traffic. The Port of Rotterdam is important for the trans-shipment of containers and bulk cargoes like petroleum, chemicals, coal and iron ore. It directly employs some 70 000 people plus another 200 000 on the outside. The FNV Havens trade union has altogether around 6 000 members in the Dutch seaports of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Zeeland, negotiating some 60 collective agreements on their behalf.

It can't go on like this, was the view of the FNV Havens union in 2019. As life expectancy has steadily increased, the age at which workers in the Netherlands receive a statutory old-age pension and a pension from their former employer(s) has steadily crept up too. In 2004, tax incentives to encourage people to retire early were scrapped. In the case of physically arduous occupations, where shift work places a heavy strain on workers' health, age 67 is far too late, says Niek Stam, leader of the FNV Havens union. Research¹ already showed back in 2017 that night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy. Port workers work round the clock in shifts, paying the price for the 24-hour economy.

The port sector has long been highly unionised, with unions successfully mobilising workers and actively working to secure arrangements that will allow them to retire early. In about 23 of the 62 collective agreements negotiated by FNV Havens, a percentage of earnings is set aside so that port workers can stop work three years early and still receive a decent income. The port workers' union also wants the high taxes that port workers pay on their irregular hours of work to be placed in an early retirement fund. Likewise the pension contribution that employers have not had to pay in recent years. Finally, agreement needs to be reached with the national government, which does not pay a cent towards early retirement, to

ensure that there is no punitive taxation here. According to Stam: 'Between now and 2032, the port sector will be putting 83 million euros into this operation. Employers also realise, of course, that older port workers are often not making it to pensionable age, that they are forced to retire earlier, and that they (the employers) have to keep paying them during two years' worth of sick leave. It is in the employers' interest too that workers should reach pensionable age in a relatively good state of health. So most of them are happy to sign up to this arrangement. It is a ground-breaking initiative in the Netherlands and unique in Europe.'

Making things as easy as possible for seniors

In the collective agreements negotiated by FNV Havens for the Dutch seaports (Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Zeeland), the union has always held out for health and safety and sustainability of employment for older port workers. Thus 'senior-appropriate arrangements' (*Senioren Fitregelingen*) are negotiated in collective agreements, allowing older employees to begin working shorter hours for the same pay and with the same accumulated pension rights five years before they reach pensionable age. 'We always try to make things as easy as possible for seniors,' says Stam. 'After all, they have often started work in the port at a young

Bruce Heezen (31)

- Job: all-round operative with EECV (trans-shipment company based in the Europoort area of Rotterdam)
- Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 15 years

'You mustn't let the pressure of work get to you'

Bruce Heezen sees a lot of older port workers getting ill or completely worn out by the time they draw their pension. They all have shoulder, knee and back problems, he reckons. Heezen himself can retire when he reaches the age of 69 years and 3 months. 'By then, I'd have had 53 years in the job,' he says. 'But I shan't manage that in the coal and iron ore trans-shipment business.'

EECV is an iron ore trans-shipment company and the main supplier of the German steel giant Thyssen-Krupp.

Unlike other dry bulk companies, EECV does not supply coal-fired power stations. Heezen: 'I love dry bulk trans-shipment. It's varied work, from lifting the coal out of the hold with a grabber bucket, cleaning stairways, shovelling out the last few tonnes when the ship is almost empty, to everything that happens beyond the bulk towers. There the big heaps of coal and iron ore are transferred by flexible loaders on to barges that go to the Ruhrgebiet region in Germany.'

Working on the trans-shipment of coal is hard, according to Heezen. Not just physically, but also the fact that you work round the clock – it's a killer. 'Often in the night, I see workmates using their break just to get some sleep. And you don't eat as healthily at night either: cakes and greasy stuff, to keep you awake. A lot of port workers are overweight and diabetic. I play a lot of sport, so I'm still fit. Though my knees and my back hurt all the time.'

Heezen is aware that accidents can happen. He has seen a lot of near accidents. He himself got trapped between two barges in 2017, as he was stepping across from one to the other. 'Luckily I escaped with just an injured knee. I could have been completely crushed. You have to be so very careful. And you mustn't let the pressure of work get to you.'

Heezen campaigns actively for the FNV Havens union. He thinks it's important that port workers should be able to stop work earlier. He went on strike over the issue at the beginning of this year. 'If you've given 40 or more years of your life to the company, you shouldn't have to suffer as a result. Being able to enjoy your retirement is a right, surely? I was recently working with an older colleague who couldn't even climb on to a barge any more. You help one another; the younger guys are able to do more.'

Johan van Kooten (56)

- Job: lashers with Matrans Marine Services Rotterdam
- Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 34 years

'You used to lash and unlash containers in jeans and sneakers'

In the Port of Rotterdam, the work of lashing containers is done by two specialist lashing companies: Matrans Marine Service (MMS) and International Lashing Services (ILS) do all the lashing for the big container terminals. Lashing companies have to be compliant with the port regulations, which insist on qualified personnel. 'It's important for containers to be properly and professionally lashed so that they can't move during rough weather,' says lashers Johan van Kooten. Van Kooten has watched the job get harder and more dangerous over the years. Operating round the clock in five shifts causes lashers to drop out early, and turnover among younger workers is high. The pressure

of work is also high: lashers operate in all weathers and boats are getting ever bigger. Containers have to be lashed or unlash as fast as possible.

When van Kooten started out as a lashers, there wasn't even a collective labour agreement. That came in 1991, after a three-week strike. 'You used to lash and unlash containers in jeans and sneakers. A ship was then 13 metres wide, and the "boxes" were stacked three high. There were two of us to a crane. Now ships are 30 metres wide and containers are stacked 11 high. But, just like 30 years ago, there are still only two men to a crane. Together with FNV Havens, we are fighting for four men to a crane, two on either side of the deck. That is far safer.'

On the often gigantic container ships that carry about 20 to 24 000 containers, the number of steep steps which lashers have to use has also increased. The rungs inside cage ladders go all the way from one level to another. 'We clip ourselves on to them for temporary protection against falls. The large number of steps you have to go up and down means that everyone has trouble with their knees. Because of the heavy lashing rods and rings used to secure and

release containers, there's also a lot of strain on your neck, shoulders, wrists and hands. Some 60% of all time lost to sickness is due to musculoskeletal issues.' Van Kooten can't understand why, in a container sector where there is so much money, lashing companies don't charge more so that lashers' safety can be improved and work teams made bigger. Only three years ago, a young lashers was killed in a fall.

The collective agreement with MMS does have measures to help older lashers. From age 55, they get extra days off; from age 57, they no longer have to do night shifts; and from age 60, they can give up lashing and do less strenuous tasks. And they can begin working shorter hours for the same pay and with the same accumulated pension rights five years before they reach pensionable age. A generic measure for the port, allowing earlier retirement, is under preparation. 'It really is necessary, because the older you get, the more physical problems you get. You don't sleep as well or as long, and it takes you longer to recover from night shifts. The 1.3 million shift workers in the Netherlands are today's canaries in the coal mine.'

↳ Training is very important for improving safety in ports.
Photo: © Martine Zunini



Night work heightens the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and shortens life expectancy.

age. And automation and robotisation have done away with a lot of lighter, physically less demanding jobs, so there is less scope for shift rotation. And it is not true that automation results in less arduous work. If you spend all day as a remote crane driver, controlling the loading and unloading of container ships from a screen, that requires a huge amount of effort and focus. But, quite apart from all the physical demands, it was the relentless rise in retirement age that called for rigorous action.'

Dangerous work

Port workers are not only at risk of premature burnout due to the arduous nature of their work and of damage to their health from shift work; the work is also dangerous. OSH legislation notwithstanding, every port worker has, at some point, experienced an accident or near-accident during his shift. A lasher falls from height, a workmate gets hit by a fork-lift truck. Cargo-related physical hazards may be a thing of the past, and more and more jobs in the port may be automated, but dangerous situations are a daily occurrence. 'With older cargoes, accidents were far more likely, but port workers were far more safety-aware,' says Stam. 'And, in some sectors, you now have more lone working, for example the straddle carrier driver, who moves containers. If he corners too fast and tips over, there's no one there to help.'

Stam, who is also vice chair of the dockers section of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), thinks it is important in the European context, and ideally internationally too, that there should

be good occupational safety and health standards in place for port workers. 'Ships are getting ever bigger, the pressure of work is intensifying, port authorities want to move cargoes as cheaply and as fast as possible. Quality has to be the priority in port work. It is for this reason that we launched the lashing campaign, for example, where our ITF inspectors check ships to make sure that lashing work really is done by qualified dockers and not by less well-paid seafarers. It's a good way of improving safety worldwide.'

In the 2020 Netherlands Working Conditions Survey, the transport and logistics sector featured amongst the country's top 10 most dangerous occupational groups. FNV Havens has long been pushing for a register of occupational accidents – if necessary, in an anonymised all-port database. Port authorities have their own safety protocols and they refuse, citing the corporate interest, to share details of some occupational accidents. Furthermore, because the government's labour inspectorate only registers absences after three days, there are no hard figures on accidents in Dutch seaports.

Safety certificate

In 2008, in an effort to improve safety and safety awareness among port workers and reduce the likelihood of accidents at work, FNV Havens set up the Safe Ports Foundation (Stichting Veilige Haven, SVH). The Foundation started from the safety surveys conducted earlier by the port trade union, in which port workers gave safety a poor rating of only six. Employers were also invited to sit on the board. An important means of improving safety is the basic and sector-specific training that is offered to port workers and that leads, since 2014, to the award of the Port Safety Certificate (Veiligheidscertificaat Havens, VCH). There are modules for the container sector, lashers, tank storage, the bulk sector and the roll-on, roll-off sector. The certificate is valid for five years. Nearly 50 port authorities have encouraged their employees to take up this training. FNV Havens thinks that all port workers should have a safety certificate.

Trade union leader Asmae Hajjari represents FNV Havens on the Foundation's board. 'Every accident is an accident too many,' she says. 'We want to see every port worker going home safe and sound at the end of the day. It's in the interest of employer and union alike. That's why, in the collective agreement, we negotiate a certain



amount of money to fund training and guarantee the Foundation's continued existence. By constantly improving the training and applying it in all potentially dangerous situations, port workers become more and more aware of their own safety and that of their workmates. And of the importance of safety protocols. Even when you're tired or pressured at work. Port workers' tasks are often extremely routine, and that's when risks can be underestimated.' ●

↑ The right equipment can be a life or death issue when working at a port.
Photo: © Martine Zunini

Ton de Munck (61)

- Job: driver with ferry operator Stena Line Hook of Holland
- Employed in the Port of Rotterdam for 35 years

'Things can so easily go wrong'

Before a ship sails, Ton de Munck drives 150 or so trailers on board, and workmates secure them with wooden chocks and chains. This lashing is hard work. And a lot of the truckers/self-drivers making the crossing to England drive their vehicles on board themselves. On arrival, the operation is carried out in reverse. In the 35 years de Munck has been working for Stena Line, not a lot has changed. 'Apart from the pressure of work,' he says. 'The

old guard has changed a bit in that a lot of the loads carried are mixed cargo. We used to have a lot more breaks and rest time between operations. There's now 20 times more work; the ships are much bigger. There used to be six trailers on a boat, now it's 160. And there are fewer workers doing the work. If you start at 1.30 p.m., you really won't have time for a coffee between 5.30 and 10.30 p.m. But, de Munck adds, 'you have to be on your toes the whole time. At peak times, you have to be super-alert. The smallest mistake can be fatal. Things can so easily go wrong.'

According to de Munck, Stena Line does tacitly take account of older port workers. They no longer have to secure trucks, and even if they no longer have to undo chains, no one complains. 'The younger guys take care of all that,' says

de Munck, whose son also works for Stena. He has been a driver for 20 years.

If it were up to him, de Munck reckons 62 is a good retirement age. 'So many of the boys have had to have hernia operations. Port workers start work early and are worn out earlier. When they're young, they enjoy hard physical work. Until they develop physical problems or start sleeping badly.'

De Munck, a trade union activist for FNV Havens, likes the fact that the port union in the Netherlands is leading the way on early retirement for workers in physically arduous jobs. 'We started with a few sums on the back of a beer mat and are now cracking on until we get a result. Thanks to FNV Havens, early retirement for workers in physically arduous jobs is now well and truly on the agenda.'