

A shortage of HGV drivers in Europe

There was an overall shortage of 400 000 HGV (heavy goods vehicle) drivers throughout Europe in 2021. Low wages, lack of appeal and family separation: the job no longer attracts the younger generations. In search of new sources of recruits, the transport sector is taking measures with a particular objective: to promote and improve working conditions in a profession that powers the economy and society.

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Héloïse Lanne deftly turns the steering wheel of her lorry, a 19-tonne HGV that is 12 metres long and 4.3 meters high, which this slender 22-year-old drives effortlessly along the roads around Reims, in north-east France. From the passenger seat, Vincent Gourdon, a trainer and former lorry driver, assesses his pupil's driving: 'Héloïse has made rapid progress during her four months of training. I have no doubt that she'll get her HGV licence in a few days.' This future truck driver intends to carry on her grandfather's haulage company. 'I'm the only one in our family who has a passion for lorries,' she says. Mélanie Moreno, a 46 year-old former childminder, also raised eyebrows when she decided to become an HGV driver, 'a job my mates thought was just for men'. This try-anything woman with tattooed arms achieved her aim in late 2021. 'The Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call for me to realise my childhood dream of driving lorries. Pôle Emploi, the government employment agency, then introduced me to RAS Intérim, a recruitment agency in Reims offering HGV training exclusively for women via its *Agir au Féminin* (Women's Action) programme.

'Rather than positive discrimination, this approach highlights the fact that women are perfectly capable of driving HGVs,' says Amel Touag, RAS Intérim's training development manager. According to a report by the OPTL (Observatory of Prospective Trends in Transport and Logistics Trades and Qualifications), women drivers represented a mere 5% of the 210 000 French HGV drivers available to transport goods in 2020. Driving an HGV used to have physical implications, but now automatic gearboxes and intelligent speed governors have made it 'more comfortable and accessible to women and people with disabilities', says Loïc Charbonnier, chairman and managing director of AFTRAL, a transport and logistics training body. In October 2020, this French training organisation went into partnership with AGEFIPH, (Fund for the Professional Integration of Disabled People) to improve the accessibility of its services. 'It's important to diversify the public we're able to serve, since demand from our clients is rising,' Charbonnier adds.

A Europe-wide shortfall

According to the Fédération Nationale des Transports Routiers (FNTR, the National Road Transport Federation), haulage companies in France need an additional 40 000 to 50 000 HGV drivers. 'This shortfall has reached a critical threshold, but the problem didn't arise overnight,' says Isabelle Maître, the FNTR's permanent delegate in Brussels. According to a survey published in August 2021 by the market research company Transport Intelligence, Europe had a shortage of over 400 000 drivers: 55 000 in Germany, 15 000 in Spain and Italy, 8 000 in Austria and 5 000 in Belgium. Poland is the most seriously affected country, with over 120 000 vacancies, followed by the United Kingdom (60 000 to 76 000 drivers sought). The UK in particular suffered the departure of 30 000 European drivers (mostly Poles, Romanians or Bulgarians) due to the pandemic in 2020. The consequences were shortages in supermarkets and petrol stations. In response, the British government deployed 200 soldiers in late 2021 to ensure fuel deliveries. Sky News reported that consideration was also given

to the issuing of 5 000 temporary work visas to relieve supply chains, a decision that seemed to conflict with the strengthening of post-Brexit immigration rules.

Migrants, like women, represent a new source of recruits. 'Since 2015, we've had regular waves of migration in Europe. By training migrants, we'll allow people who are interested in transport and logistics to take part. This is a win-win situation,' says Isabelle Maître. In Belgium, the IFAPME (Walloon Institute for Work-Linked Training, the Self-Employed and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) and the Jost Transport Company have brought in some 10 migrants from Syria, Iraq and Somalia since 2018 to train as HGV drivers, though not everything is as clear cut as this. 'When I arrived in Germany, haulage companies didn't accept my licence. I had to lay out 2 000 euros to take my HGV test again and get equivalence. And then there's the language barrier. You have to be really motivated,' says Veselin Trakilovic, a Bosnian lorry driver who is 45 years old - the average age of European HGV drivers.

The sector is, in fact, facing the problem of an ageing workforce throughout Europe. 'The job no longer attracts the younger generations,' complains Jean-Marc Rivera, general delegate of the Organisation des Transporteurs Routiers Européens (OTRE), a hauliers' association. The reason: a negative image of HGV, 'which public opinion blames for all ills: lorries are accident-prone, they block up the roads and they pollute,' Mr. Rivera adds. The sector is pursuing energy transition, and abandoning diesel in favour of natural gas. However, according to a study published in late 2021 by the NGO Transport et Environnement, these would-be 'green' lorries emit 13.4% more greenhouse gases than diesel models. Éric Bernard, manager of a French road haulage company, focuses on the 'high technological level' of new HGVs to attract young people, 'a great many of whom mistakenly see transport as a road to nowhere'. Set up in 2019, Le Monde du Transport Réuni association that he runs seeks to foster entrepreneurship by increasing communication activities in colleges and schools and on social networks.

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Poor working conditions and low wages

Once they have been recruited, efforts must be made to ensure that new HGV drivers are retained. The difficult working conditions 'discourage more than one', observes Karl Zener, a former lorry driver from Belgium. Out of the six trainees this HGV instructor was responsible for in the previous year, only three are now drivers. Of course, these transport foot soldiers drive big beautiful trucks, but behind the scenes: 'You face hours of driving. At night, the service areas are often full so you have to park up on the road. You sleep in the back of the lorry, your bedding dries on your vehicle's radiator grill. This can go on for months, without seeing your family,' says Veselin Trakilovic, who now only drives in his own country and sleeps at home every night. 'Drivers also feel insecure,' adds Christophe Denizot, General Secretary of the French Fédération SUD-Solidaires des Transports Routiers. 'Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine provoked higher fuel costs, thefts have increased at service areas, with a risk of violence.'

Conversely, what has not increased are wages. 'As long as they remain low, bosses will be unable to improve the image of HGV drivers,' says Cristina Tilling, policy officer for the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF), the EU trade union for the sector. In France, the eight coefficients that make up the wage scale defined by the National Collective Agreement on Road Transport fall between 10.57 and 11.01 euros per hour. The Guaranteed Minimum Wage (the SMIC) currently stands at

10.57 euros per hour. 'The main concern of this profession is an hourly rate that recognises neither professional qualifications nor the experience of age,' complains Christophe Denizot. Like many of their European counterparts, French lorry drivers count on bonuses, night work or travel allowances to increase their basic wages. 'A driver can earn up to 3 000 euros gross, but only by working over 220 hours a month,' this trade unionist points out.

In response to the shortage, haulage companies have to loosen their purse strings. This is the case in the United Kingdom. According to the British recruitment site Adzuna, between March 2020 and March 2021, the average annual wage of a lorry driver rose from 30 000 to 37 000 UK pounds (35 000 to 43 000 euros). In Austria in the same year, HGV drivers' unions negotiated a 3.5% increase in pay. In February 2022, French wage earners obtained a 5% increase in wages, with an additional 1% on 1 May 2022. Another victory in January 2022, this time by the Spanish, prohibited drivers from helping to load and unload their vehicles. 'After nine hours on the road, it was not acceptable for our professional drivers to have to load 20 tonnes of fruit and vegetables, for example, on safety grounds, and also because it's not part of their skill set,' the vice-chair of the Spanish International Road Transport Association, Ramon Valdivia, declared to the media. Particularly since these operations 'are rarely paid for by the bosses, who include them in their employees' rest hours. If drivers refuse to comply, they are threatened with losing a shift or a bonus,' complains Cristina Tilling.

Strengthening European regulations

In December 2021, following a motorway check in Belgium, the dramatic situation of a Ukrainian driver was put under the spotlight. Employed by a Polish subcontractor of the German international transport giant Hegelmann, Mykola had been living in his truck on lorry parks for 17 weeks with barely anything to eat. Forced into begging, the 45-year-old worker had apparently received no wages in four months. 'There are thousands of drivers on the roads like this one, whom we helped. This is truly a case of human trafficking and therefore modern slavery,' complained Roberto Parrillo, chairman of the ETF's road transport section, to Radio-Télévision Belge Francophone (RTBF).

↳ HGV drivers face tough working conditions, including hours of driving and uncomfortable sleeping arrangements.
Photo: © Diego Ravier

To improve truck drivers' working conditions, in August 2020 the European Parliament adopted the Mobility Package, an essential reform of the sector. This came into force in stages, though international hauliers are already required to return to their homes every four weeks. As for the 45-hour weekly rest period to which they are entitled, 'this must be spent away from the vehicle, in accommodation chargeable to the employer', explains ETF's Cristina Tilling. The reform also allows HGV drivers to benefit from fairer remuneration, which is defined from now on according to the rules of the state in which they work (and no longer according to the country in which the company is domiciled). 'If a driver employed by a Romanian transport company is seconded for a substantial period to work locally in Belgium, they will be paid on the basis of the remuneration applicable in Belgium,' says Isabelle de Maegt, from the Belgian Federation of Road Haulage Operators.

'We don't want less, but more still from Europe,' insists the FNTR's Isabelle Maître. 'This is because road transport is

a cross-border industry, since the rules are the same for everyone.' The adoption of the Package nevertheless brought tensions to the surface: 'The negotiations were extremely protracted (over two and a half years), but particularly so afterwards,' says Karima Delli, MEP and chair of the European Parliament's Transport and Tourism Committee. 'The divisions were essentially geographical: on one side were supporters of the harmonisation of the rules and of protectionism (western European side), while on the other were supporters of social and fiscal dumping (central and eastern European side).' In March 2021, seven countries, including Poland, Romania and Malta, had already brought an appeal before the European Union Court of Justice seeking to annul the Mobility Package. At issue were new rules which, according to east European hauliers, represented an additional cost. They also fear a loss of market share in western Europe because of the new cabotage regulations, which have been seen as a problem for several years. The Mobility Package reduces to three the



number of journeys authorised per vehicle entering foreign territory. Four days of absence must then be respected. Against all expectations, Belgium, which had no hesitation in supporting the Mobility Package, joined the complaint on cabotage issues in April 2021. The rule would have an adverse effect on Belgian hauliers, which specialise in cabotage in France.

‘The application and control of these rules is the duty of the hauliers, but also of each Member State. The fact remains that the political will and the measures put in place continue to be inadequate,’ regrets Cristina Tilling. Bringing together 450 affiliates, including national hauliers’ trade unions, the European Transport Workers’ Federation therefore looks forward to the arrival in 2023 of new ‘smart tachographs’. These ‘black boxes’, which are mandatory for newly registered HGVs, will make it possible to geolocate vehicles and to transmit several pieces of data to the control authorities automatically. This will ensure that European road transport fraud is tackled more effectively, and that workers’ health and safety are improved at the same time by regulating working hours and meal times.

An occupation at the heart of our lives

‘When we present the reform of the Mobility Package to them, drivers tell us that it’s too good to be true,’ says Cristina Tilling. ‘They doubt that their situation can improve.’ ‘We’re the fifth wheel, the one that’s most used but shown least consideration,’ complains Christophe Denizot. At the height of lockdown in 2020, the health crisis repeatedly demonstrated this: ‘While they were awaited like the Messiah to restock the supermarkets in record time and deliver masks and medicines to hospitals, drivers were treated as if they were plague-ridden,’ complains Éric Bernard, chairman of the Le Monde du Transport Réuni recruitment platform. ‘Certain rest areas and establishments wouldn’t let us use the toilets,’ says Quentin Bonnefoy, a 23-year-old French lorry driver who points out that, without

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↑ Younger generations have a negative image of lorries, as being accident-prone and polluting.
Photos: © Diego Ravier

them, ‘France, along with other countries, would be much less attractive. Society doesn’t realise that virtually all goods are transported by lorry, except for air, which, like us, is invisible.’

The duel is also increasingly being fought with the giants of online ordering such as Amazon, which, by offering discount transport costs if not free delivery, ‘devalue the professionalism of men and women who can fulfil delivery orders and instructions for an open sandwich submitted at 6 p.m., for example, to be delivered the following morning at 10 a.m.’, says Éric Bernard. To respond to consumer requirements and ever-increasing demands, driverless lorries were recently introduced in the United States, which has also been affected

by a recent shortage of lorry drivers. Might Europe be interested in this solution? ‘We’re very far from having sufficient technology,’ says the OTRE’s Jean-Marc Rivera. In particular, these driving wheels produced by a world that wants everything immediately ‘do not currently have the Europe-wide benefit of acceptability either by the profession or by opinion. That would also require huge data centres that consume too much energy,’ states a Green MEP. ‘We’re not against innovation, but it’s time to learn lessons from the pandemic and from the multiple crises we’re facing in our consumption patterns.’ Meanwhile, back in Reims, learner driver Héloïse Lanne continues her route, hands firmly on the wheel of her HGV, contemplating more promising horizons. ●