

**Interview with David Zindo  
on the occasion of the Keepers' Summit 2024  
by FERPRESS, Italian news agency**



David Zindo is the president of UIP- the International Union of Wagon Keepers - based in Brussels. Zindo has a long experience in managing freight wagon fleets. Next month he will chair the annual UIP event 'Keepers' Summit' in Venice.

**There will be two central themes at your convention in Venice: the development of a major project to digitize the rail sector and, most importantly, the discussion of the market acceptance of the new DAC (Digital Automatic Coupling) system. Would you like to anticipate some insights from your intervention?**

Our Keepers' Summit is always an occasion to put the finger on issues that are particularly in the limelight of attention for our wagon keepers. We see our biggest added value in providing a stage to have a discussion on a larger scale and with the input of many brilliant minds from not only a sectoral but also from an institutional and governmental perspective.

Bringing 'systemic digitalisation' to the rail freight sector is as much necessary as it is revolutionary and therefore 'scary' in some way. We are naturally sceptical of what we do not know. And here we are talking about a huge change if we are to integrate the DAC into our rail freight operations.

But we have to remember that the rail freight sector is simply 'late' in innovating compared to other sectors. However, if we think of the many

'cogs' that make up our rail system, we can be proud of having a majority of them turn in synchronicity now, geared towards the goal of digitalizing, automating and connecting our rail freight system. We have now passed the stage of not believing but we need concrete proof that it will actually work.

We don't ask anyone to rely on blind faith. I will e.g. raise the point of the importance on keeping abreast with developments. UIP has developed the Webinar format 'Renew' for example where we give periodical updates and answer questions on digitalization efforts in the sector. The sounding boards at Europe's Rail TRANS4M-R project are open to all to better understand the DAC technology.

There are more events like ours that talk about transforming the rail freight sector because transform we must. And not everyone in their own corner but in a concerted manner.

That is why we wish that the UIP Keepers' Summit is as much a knowledge sharing opportunity as it is a fruitful networking occasion.

**It is no mystery that the implementation of the DAC system for several hundred thousand wagons involves a cost that is difficult to bear for the rail freight sector and its users. Is it possible, according to UIP, to think about a phased approach? And with what contribution from European institutions?**

What we expect first and foremost is the general realization that the DAC ushers in a systemic transformation which benefits society first of all. An optimized rail freight transport which is digital, automated and connected can bring about that modal shift that we absolutely need to reach our Green Deal targets.

Ultimately we need Member States and EU Institutions to throw a lot of their financial weight behind the support of the DAC because no, the sector will not be able to do it on its own.

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By investing in the DAC however, Member States and EU Institutions are saving on a much bigger bill they inevitably have to foot by continuing to pay the price for emissions, pollution, congestion, state aid etc.

Magda Kopczyk, Director-General for Mobility and Transport at the European Commission at the Connecting Europe Days event in Brussels showed herself in favour of a phased approach that would first focus on financing of the Pre-deployment trains that are crucial to validate the DAC in real-live circumstances.

The recently signed “DAC Declaration” by the transport ministers of Austria, Germany and Switzerland is a testimony to the visionary leadership of those countries pledging some financial support to the modernization of rail freight.

These are already signs of growing momentum and we need to build on this. If the EU can help us over the phase of the pre-deployment trains which will make people actually ‘see it can be done’, then the ball will have started rolling seriously and it will be easier to garner more support.

**It is quite clear that the DAC system is intimately linked to the digitization (and electrification) of wagons. What are the benefits for rail freight rail services, which in some countries (e.g., Italy) are struggling to meet the targets also fixed by the EU?**

Rail freight services stand to gain so much from the DAC. At the risk of repeating buzz words but the DAC is truly an ‘enabler’. We can keep dreaming of doubling rail freight by 2050 as much as we want, if we cannot ensure a faster ‘turn around’ of wagons, run longer and faster rail freight trains more often, execute performance-based maintenance, offer continuous tracking

and reliable ETAs etc. we simply cannot convince customers to opt for our services instead of road for example. The EU has set goals in order to achieve the Green Deal objectives and we all know why we have to do everything we can to get there: to preserve our planet for future generations.

In our sector (it might actually be the case in every sector) we tend to look ‘inwards’ before we look outwards, i.e. we don’t always see the famous ‘bigger picture’ but zoom in on our part. However, given the nature of our sector (i.e. more

than 50% of rail freight is carried out ‘cross-border’), trying to find solutions ‘in isolation’ is half as effective as adopting a perspective that encompasses the whole system, geographical and technical. Coordination is key and e.g. data sharing thanks to the digitization and electrification will facilitate this.

Wagon leasing companies are already providing good services to the best of their abilities and they are continuously investing in

improving their offer but they are limited by the railways legacy as well as the system that is not fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a limit as to how many couplings a shunter can decouple and couple per day manually, there is a limit as to how accurately you can detect damages and avoid accidents if not assisted by powerful monitoring and sensor technology, there is a limit as to how many trains you can run on the network if you don’t optimize the slots using data and computing power that ensures safety and optimum capacity utilization. And all of this can only work if we operate in a standardized system that takes advantage of what 21<sup>st</sup> century technology can offer us.





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“Move with the times” is a mantra that we would do well to heed.

**Digitization and DAC, but will there also be other points under discussion in Venice? For example, how these new technologies can make infrastructure utilization more efficient and safe.**

All is related of course. We cannot talk about the DAC and digitization without referring to its inherent advantage of making ‘better’ use of the infrastructure.

More and better data sharing will feed into optimization of capacity use whilst simultaneously ensuring that the highest standards of safety are respected. Digital technology can help us seize opportunities that are out of reach for now.

**At the end of May there will be the Keeper's Summit 2024, organized by the International Union of Wagon Keeper's (UIP) together with ASSOFERR. What is the role of the International Union of Wagon Keepers and an association like ASSOFERR in realizing the "rail freight revolution" and achieving the goals of digitization and sustainability of rail freight?**

Our role at UIP is to table the realities of the wagon keeper business and lend a strong voice to their interests in a European context. Through our national member associations such as ASSOFERR we represent 50% of the total of ton-kms around Europe by leasing half of all rail freight wagons (ca. 250 000 wagons) that

circulate in Europe. Those are significant resources without which the European supply chains would break down.

One voice spoken at the right moment may have a stronger impact than many voices uttered in a disconcerted manner. UIP strives to speak up at the most opportune moment to be heard and push for action. We also work closely with other railway stakeholders and create synergies to maximise our outreach. We are part of rail innovation projects like FP5 TRANS4M-R and Europe's Rail System Pillar where we contribute to bringing these endeavours to fruition.

Of course we count immensely on our national member associations like ASSOFERR. We funnel all of their input and also their expertise, their local ‘temperature taking’ and connections with decision makers at government level into our advocacy work with the European Institutions but also other organisations. We put a particular emphasis on educating and providing trainings to improve knowledge and harmonized application of rail freight operating rules.

‘Many small rivers make an ocean’. We are one of those rivers that feeds the constant campaigning for a rail freight fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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