

“T.O. should have the right to invest”

No to competition by public authorities with public money, and guarantees concerning concessions: Lamia Belkaid explains the politics of FEPORT

by **MARIA MARAINI**, Brussels

FOUNDED in 1993, FEPORT is the European organisation which promotes the interest of a large variety of terminal operators and stevedoring companies performing operations and carrying out activities over 400 terminals in the seaports of the European Union.

Lamia Kerdjoudj-Belkaid is the Secretary General of this federation, representing around 1,200 companies, corresponding to around 80% of the EU terminal operators and employing more than 250 thousand port workers.

FEPORT will have its General Assembly on 3 December 2015. In this framework, a conference “Why does an efficient logistics chain require close dialogue?” will be also organised. What will be the main topics of discussion?

“The purpose of this conference is to establish a better coordination among stakeholders to respond to the growing size of container ships. Today, mega-ships entering our ports have not only repercussions on the Terminal operators and of course ship owners, but also on the entire logistics chain. To deal with more containers, we need better road and rail infrastructures, less bureaucracy in the transmission of information, as well as more security. These challenges cannot wait and all stakeholders must be involved.”

MEP Knut Fleckenstein (S&D, Germany) published his new draft report on the Port Regulation proposal. The text provoked different reactions and more than 600 additional amendments have been presented in the EP Transport Committee; what is the position of



FEPORT on this issue?

“First of all, we have to say that we are a bit skeptical about the added value that this report could bring to our industry. From the beginning, we affirmed that this topic should not be considered as a priority, and the fact that this text was not quickly approved by the European Parliament confirms our opinion. However, now the report is there and fortunately there is a significant improvement in the text compared to the start of the discussions. We are very pleased that the three institutions called to express their opinion on this, namely the Commission, the Parliament and the Council - represented by the then Italian Presidency - did not fully support the idea of the ‘organization of services’, meaning a greater opening of the market. We believe, in fact, this industry is already very com-

petitive and no further openings are needed. We also have some concern on the chapter regarding the transparency: we consider inappropriate that public authorities can create sales offices financed by public money, without any control and in competition with private operators.”

Are you in favour of compensations for port terminals that lose their concessions? In Italy, these concessions are often extended by port authorities without having a public tender, but recently the Port Authority of Genoa raised some doubts about this praxis.

“We followed what happened in Italy only indirectly, through our affiliates. The position of FEPORT is very simple: the practice of some operators to invest only when the contract starts, is no longer appropriate. Today, the demand grows



constantly and operators are often called to invest heavily also two or three years before the end of their contract. Indeed, you cannot operate and provide quality services, if you do not invest continuously. It is obvious that a healthy competition is needed for the market, but it is also true that terminal operators have the right to demand the renewal of concessions or, failing that, a compensation mechanism in case of new providers."

The harbours of Algeciras and Barcelona decided to automate their terminal significantly. Today they are suffering a big crisis. Do you think these two aspects are linked?

"I will answer with an example. Among our affiliated members there is the Best Terminal of Barcelona (Hutchison Port Holdings Lim-

ited -HPH). This terminal is semi-automated and works very well. Of course, the decision was agreed with the workers represented through their Trade unions. This choice was mandatory, 'imposed' by the customers demand. To operate with ships of enormous size, a Terminal cannot operate anymore with the conventional work, because it is not able to respond to the multiplication of flows. In addition, as you know, ships enter in ports often at the same time, basically on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays. Therefore, in addition to the increase of containers to be unloaded, we also need to deal with a concentration of arrival times. Anyway, we must dispel the myth that in automated ports there are not humans working ... and moreover most of the ports are only partially automated, as in the

case of Barcelona. Perhaps, what happens today in our field has already happened in other areas where technological progress transformed strenuous work in easier and less dangerous activities. On this, everyone agrees, including seafarers, who recognize that their job today is much lighter and safer."

COSCO bought Piraeus and is ready to buy the Terminal of Thessaloniki; what is the opinion of Fepor about this operation?

"About COSCO we do not have a real position, because unlike all the other big operators COSCO is not one among our affiliates. Of course, the privatisation of a port should not be rejected as such, but should be prepared intelligently, working in the interest of everybody and listening to all stakeholders involved."