Opening Event: Conflicts over Labour & Socio-Ecological Transformation in Global Logistics

Logistics Workers Between Migration, Precarity, Rationalisation & Fragmentation

15. September > 18 Uhr
SDG+ LAB im UNI:Lokal
Wilhelmsstraße 21

Lars Stubbe (ver.di Hamburg)
Irene Knoke (SÜDWIND Institut)
Alexander Gallas (Frankfurt UAS)

Moderation: Anne Engelhardt & Janina Puder

The evening event will be in English with Portuguese translation.

DINNER AT ARKADAS
SICKINGENSTR. 10, 34117 KASSEL

15 SEPT. 2025
AT 18:00AM - 20:00PM

SDG+ LAB UNI:LOKAL
WILHELMSSTRASSE 21, 34117 KASSEL

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus - Senftenberg
Chair of Economic and Industrial Sociology

Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung

Kassel Institute for Sustainability

UNIKASSEL VERSITÄT

Fachgebiet Entwicklungspolitik & Postkoloniale Studien

Fachgebiet Internationale Beziehungen mit Schwerpunkt Lateinamerika

GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN

Social-ecological transformation & labour conflicts in the logistics sector

16 SEPT. 2025
AT 09:00AM - 5:00PM

BOOTSHAUS
AUEDAMM 72A, 34121 KASSEL

Programme 16. Sept. 2025

Welcome and Introduction

- 09:00 AM - 09:25 AM

Socio-Ecological Transformation and Labor Conflicts in the Logistics Sector – An Introduction Into the Issue (Anne Engelhardt /Janina Puder)

Part A: Socio-ecological and social reproductive struggles

Chair: Anne Engelhardt

Authoritarian practices in socio-environmental struggles over logistical infrastructures (Alke Jenss, Freiburg, GER)

- 09:30 AM - 10:10 AM

Between Rest Stop and Supply Chain: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Collective Agency in Road Freight Transport (Daniel Heinz, Osnabrück, GER)

- 10:15 AM - 10:55 AM

Disrupting Logistics: Solidarity Strikes, Labour-Market Power, and Unequal Ecological Exchange in Chilean Ports (Lucas Cifuentes, Santiago, CL)

- 11:00 AM - 11:40 AM

Lunch

- 11:40 AM - 13:10 AM

Part B: Geo-economics and military tensions

Chair: Janina Puder

The logistics revolution and circulation struggles in warehouses and delivery (Alessandro Peregalli, Teófilo Otoni - MG, BR)

- 13:15 AM - 13:55 AM

Contested Port Transformation in Hamburg – workers' perspectives and practices regarding privatisation as a response to geo-economic pressures (Jule E. Westerheide, Bochum, GER)

- 14:00 PM - 14:40 PM

Coffee Break

- 14:40 PM - 15:00 PM

Part C: (International) struggles against the contested conditions of work and social reproduction

Chair: Janina Puder

'The new way of flying doesn't care about us.' Embodied Struggle in a Liberalised Sky (Sara Cufré, Buenos Aires, ARG)

- 15:00 PM - 15:40 PM

Transport Logistics and the Relationship with the Global Work of Dockers (Fátima Queiróz, Santos - SP, BR)

- 15:45 PM - 16:25 PM

The Next-Node Approach – A Brief Possible Input (Michaela Doutch, Bonn, GER)

- 16:30 PM - 17:10 PM

Coffee Break

- 17:10 PM - 17:30 PM

Part D: Further Considerations & Conclusion

- 17:30 PM - 18:00 PM

What are the main ideas/thoughts, plans for publications, and further meetings/working together (Anne Engelhardt /Janina Puder)

Dinner

- 19:00 PM

LOHMANN
KÖNIGSTOR 8, 34117 KASSEL

Background of the workshop

As an interface for global trade and production relationships, the logistics sector is a key player in the global economy (Bonacich, 2003, p. 41). Encompassing the infrastructure, industrial processes and labour that are directly linked to the global transport of goods and commodities, it forms the basis for transnational production networks. Therefore, it is difficult to envisage a socio-ecological transformation of the global economy without changes to the logistics sector (e.g. Nogué-Algueró, 2019).

The logistics sector is already under considerable pressure to transform. At the global level, this pressure is evident in the context of the environmental crisis and mounting geo-economic and military tensions (Brennan, 2021). At the local level, it emerges against the backdrop of conflicts concerning work and social reproduction within logistics networks (Engelhardt, 2025). The ecological consequences of sea, air and road transport, and the direct and indirect health impacts on employees, are particularly bringing logistics to the forefront of debates on sustainability, health and safety at work (Cufré/Engelhardt, 2024). Environmental regulations, discussions about low-emission transport concepts, and the spatial redesign of global supply chains influence the working and living conditions of logistics employees, as do technological innovations and changing competitive conditions.

Against the backdrop of the need for a socio-ecological transformation of the global economy, it is crucial to analyse the intricate interplay between socio-ecological shifts, geo-economic shifts, and disputes over working and reproductive conditions, all of which converge within the logistics sector, a pivotal network in the global economy.

The workshop will focus on three core areas of logistics that exemplify the sector's transformation dynamics and conflicts: the aviation industry, container shipping, and the port sector. Developments in these areas have far-reaching implications for related sectors, such as truck and warehouse logistics, and significantly impact the structures and development dynamics of the global market. At the macro level, we will examine structural changes in the logistics industry relating to the political management of environmental and climate crises, as well as geo-economic and military tensions (e.g. between the US, the EU and China). We will consider how these structural changes influence specific working and social conditions. At the micro level, we will focus on conflicts surrounding the working conditions and social reproduction of logistics employees, and discuss the extent to which local disputes impact the structures of the global logistics industry and influence transformation processes. Our aim is to identify the political, economic, social, and institutional challenges of a socio-ecological transformation of logistics. To this end, we consider three fields in which logistics is being transformed, which we bring together analytically in the workshop.

A) Decarbonisation and unequal resource use

The need to decarbonise the global economy raises the question of how goods and supply chains can be made more environmentally friendly and climate-neutral in future. Goods flows that appear economically sensible, such as the export of perishables, are increasingly problematic from an ecological point of view as they cause significant CO_2 emissions. The growing importance of strategic raw materials, such as copper and lithium, which are indispensable for renewable energies and climate-friendly technologies (including in the transport sector), and their unequal geographical distribution, are exacerbating existing North–South inequalities and conflicts (e.g. Dietz, 2023; Dorn & Dietz, 2024). While precarious working conditions with low wages and inadequate occupational safety often prevail in the Global South, companies in the Global North benefit from low production costs thanks to extensive logistics networks, without taking responsibility for the social and environmental consequences of resource extraction (e.g. Schaffartzik/Kusche, 2020; Puder, 2022). However, even in the Global North, global supply chains can have significant negative environmental and socio-economic impacts at the local level. An example of this is the socio-ecological conflict that arose in the 2000s at the Port of Los Angeles (USA), one of the world's most important trade hubs. Residents of nearby residential areas protested against the significant air pollution caused by the increasing port-related truck traffic. In contrast, truck drivers protested against precarious working conditions and low wages in the sector (Bensman & Jaffee, 2016). Against this backdrop, it is necessary to analyse socio-ecological transformation processes and conflicts in the logistics sector from a multi-scale perspective, rather than exclusively along a North–South axis. This is because changes and conflicts in transnational commodity and goods chains occur at different, intertwined socio-spatial levels (Petzold & Pichl, 2023).

B) Geo-economic and military tensions

With the rise of the BRICS countries and China's growing importance as a ‘global supply chain empire’ (Arboleda, 2020), control over strategic infrastructure, such as seaports, rail networks, and data flows, has become a decisive instrument of economic power. An example of this is President Donald Trump's recent demand that the Panama Canal be placed under US control, by military means if necessary. This demand is not only intended to reduce transit fees for US merchant ships significantly, but also to gain control over one of the world's most important trade routes.
In view of increasing trade tensions, strategies such as reshoring or nearshoring — i.e. relocating production and supply chains to domestic or nearby regions — are becoming increasingly important. These strategies aim to reduce economic dependencies and minimise risks in global production networks. At the same time, the resilience of supply chains must be strengthened without compromising the efficiency and flexibility of just-in-time production models. This creates a conflict for governments between economic competitiveness and securing supply chains. The ecological restructuring of the economy further complicates this conflict. Against this backdrop, many countries are increasingly relying on strategies to automate logistics work and partially privatise strategic infrastructure (e.g. Buss et al., 2022; Engelhardt, 2025) to attract large private investments and make locations more competitive. This often leads to changes and conflicts regarding work and social reproduction conditions in the logistics sector.

C) Contested work and social reproduction conditions

The logistics industry is undergoing profound rationalisation and privatisation processes that are changing the structure of global logistics networks and significantly impacting the working conditions and social reproduction of employees (Cowen, 2014; Khalili, 2020; Plehwe, 2001; Sowers, 2017). Rationalisation drives in the form of the automation and digitalisation of work processes aim to increase the efficiency of logistics processes and reduce labour costs. However, these processes often jeopardise jobs, restrict employees' autonomy and intensify control and monitoring of work processes. The privatisation of public logistics infrastructure and companies often leads to workforce fragmentation, work process disintegration and a decline in collective capacity to act. This raises key questions about labour rights and co-determination (Möller, 2024; Puder & Westerheide, 2025). Automation and privatisation dynamics also intensify the compression of work processes. This can lead to an increased workload and negatively impact the social lives of logistics workers, resulting in issues such as stress, depression, physical pain and chronic fatigue. This impairs workers' ability to regenerate outside of work, which negatively impacts their long-term ability to work and their quality of life.

Changes in work and social reproduction within global logistics networks cannot be understood as solely resulting from altered geo-economic power relations, technological advances or new ownership structures (Engelhardt, 2020; Nowak, 2020). Local struggles over work and reproduction, as well as trade union disputes, also directly impact the strategic design of supply chains and location policy, potentially altering them in the long term (Coe, 2020; Herod, 2001). Such conflicts also influence the long-term development of socio-ecological transformation processes in the logistics industry (Bensmann/Jaffee 2016; Moody 2022).

The existing changes in working and social reproduction conditions in the logistics industry have been further accelerated by the pandemic, exposing the vulnerabilities of employees and the structural contradictions and conflicts in the sector in a particularly drastic manner. In the aviation industry, job cuts continued during and after the pandemic, further increasing employees' workload. At the same time, employees were exposed to a high health risk, as air travel was considered one of the primary ways the virus spread. These factors led to increased conflict, putting pressure on airlines and disrupting air traffic (Cufré & Engelhardt, 2024). In Brazil, port workers also stopped working to be included in the primary groups of the vaccination campaign, given the health risks they faced as system-relevant workers. Another striking example of the pandemic's impact on work and reproductive conditions in the logistics industry is the so-called 'crew change crisis', which affected around 400,000 seafarers. Due to lockdowns, they were stranded either at sea or on land. This affected the handling of goods and cargo worldwide and led to considerable social isolation among seafarers, resulting in an increase in depression and suicide cases.

The three areas outlined above, in which the transformation of the global logistics industry is having a concrete impact, have so far received little attention in terms of their interconnections and their relevance to a socio-ecological transformation of the global economy. In social science research, the logistics industry is regarded as a complex system connecting work, production processes, markets, and supply networks at various socio-spatial levels (Doutch, 2022; Rodriguez & Hesse, 2006). However, the extent to which these interdependencies influence socio-ecological transformation processes in the global economy remains largely unanswered. Critical perspectives emphasise that the logistics sector reflects global market dynamics and plays a key role in reproducing global inequalities (Brennan 2021; Cowen 2014; Danyluk 2017). In view of the social and geo-economic conflicts that are expected during socio-ecological transformation, there is an urgent need for in-depth scientific analysis of the dynamics within the logistics industry at both the macro and micro levels. This is important not only because of the sector's structural significance, but also because control mechanisms, the social composition of the workforce and conflict dynamics are changing so rapidly. The design and enforcement of work processes, rights and co-determination in the logistics industry in future will be decisive in determining whether the sector becomes a driver of social and environmentally sustainable transformation or further exacerbates existing social and environmental crises. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of transformation processes within global logistics networks could offer valuable insights into the development and manifestation of geo-economic conflicts between major powers at various socio-spatial levels. The planned workshop will examine these interactions in depth using concrete case studies from two closely linked levels of analysis. Firstly, we will discuss the socio-ecological, political, and economic macro trends that influence actor constellations, ownership structures, and political regulation in the logistics industry. Secondly, we will examine changes in the organisation, processes and conflicts of workers in the logistics industry, which in turn influence geo-economic macro trends. Geographically, the workshop will focus on three regions that are relevant to global trade: Europe, North America, and Latin America.

Key questions of the workshop

- What interactions exist between the global dynamics of transformation in logistics and the local conditions of work and social reproduction?
- How do conflicts over working conditions, social reproduction processes and geo-economic power relations influence the structuring of global logistics networks and the orientation and implementation of a socio-ecological transformation in the logistics sector?
- To what extent do decarbonisation strategies in the logistics sector — which are often accompanied by rationalisation, automation and privatisation — promote sustainable global supply chain transformation? Or do they, in the long term, contradict the principles of social and ecological sustainability and reproduce social and ecological inequalities in global logistics networks?
- Who are the key actors for a socially just and ecologically sustainable transformation of the logistics industry?