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ITCO supports members through challenging times

Bulk Distributor caught up with ITCO president Reginald J Lee to see how the organisation and its members are coping with the pandemic

BD: COVID – what's happening in the market and how ITCO is supporting members?

RJL: The tank container market has remained very buoyant over the past 18 months, with production of chemicals, petrochemicals and foodgrade products remaining high during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has led to continued demand for tank containers by shippers, with tank container operators working hard to provide reliable logistics services. ITCO's role is to support its members by promoting the safety and sustainability benefits of the tank container, and by providing relevant technical, regulatory and safety guidelines.

BD: Has there been increased safety training or discussions to cope with the challenges?

RJL: Safety remains the top priority for ITCO – and the organisation has a strong focus on promoting safe tank operations. We do this in a number of ways – through the Tank Container E-Learning Course, which includes considerable information on safe tank operations; through the webinars focusing on safety that we have organised over the past year; and through the Technical Guidelines. Two of our most recent guidelines have covered 'Safe Entry into Tank Containers' and 'Safe Working on Top of a Tank Container'.

BD: Recruitment/skill shortages – this has been a big topic in recent years. What is ITCO's position?

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RJL: Recruitment of skilled staff into the industry – for tank operators and manufacturers – continues to be a challenge. To

encourage graduates to enter the industry, ITCO donated a tank container to the Shanghai Maritime University – an institution specialised in providing graduates wishing to enter the shipping and logistics industry – so that students could have a better understanding of the tank container industry, permitting them to learn more about tanks by seeing one on their campus. The opportunity to access an actual tank container and learn about how it works gives student a much better understanding of this equipment. However, courses at the university have been reduced over the past year, and so the tank container training has been postponed until the situation returns to normal.



BD: How has ITCO coped with the challenges of past year, eg, measures put in place to cope with COVID and quieter markets?

RJL: The tank container market has not been quiet over the past year – in fact, it has been very busy, for both deepsea and short-sea operations. A major challenge has been that most staff have been working at home. While Teams and Zoom calls have enabled staff to continue communicating with each other, ITCO believes that most companies will wish to return to office working when it is safe and practical to do so.

BD: Have members highlighted any particular issues in the market?

RJL: One of the biggest issues facing tank container operators – especially those operating from Asia to Europe and North America – is the availability of space on board containerships. Port congestion and delays to ships' schedules have contributed significantly to the problems for tank container operators to book space on board – and delays in shipments arriving. In addition, freight rates have soared, which has increased costs for shippers. Furthermore, operators have had to cope with the shortage of drivers that are available to collect and deliver the tanks

BD: As you mentioned, ITCO has conducted a number of webinars to compensate for the impossibility of face-to-face meetings. What is ITCO's programme for the rest of this year in terms of providing knowledge content for members?

RJL: Unfortunately, ITCO was not able to organise its annual 'Tank Container Village' at the Transport Logistic China exhibition in Shanghai last year, or at the Transport Logistic show in Munich this year – both of which events had to be cancelled. Nor have we been able to organise our annual members meetings. So, for the last year, ITCO has organised a series of webinars – covering a range of topics, including 'Sustainability', 'Safety', 'Regulations' and 'Testing Equivalency', as well as our annual divisional meetings. We will continue to organise webinars for the foreseeable future – with Safety again being the topic of our July meeting. There will be further webinars in the last quarter of 2021, focusing on topics such as 'Sustainability' and 'Efficiency'.

BD: From the point of view of ITCO as an industry body, would you care to forecast how the post-pandemic tank container industry might look like? Will it be a return to normal, or might some things change forever?

RJL: Some things will return to normal, some will have changed for ever. More customers are looking for efficiencies through 'just-in-time' shipping – or even 'just-in-case' shipping. Customers are also reducing the demurrage time of tanks with their products in – in other words, they are discharging tank containers more quickly at their premises, thus allowing the tanks to return to return for future loads. While there will be always be a benefit from face-to-face meetings with customers, the use of video calls for meetings has become normal practice now – thus reducing travel for staff. Acquisitions and changes of ownership – especially in the leasing sector – may lead to increased numbers of tanks being ordered. And we see an increased focus on training and education in the future.

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