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<p style="text-align: center;">EUROPEAN BUSINESS CALLS ON COUNCIL TO DEFINE CLEAR TIMETABLE FOR LIBERALISATION OF RAIL FREIGHT TRANSPORT</p>

At a meeting today with Minister Gayssot, President of the EU Council of Transport Ministers, representatives of business in Europe urged the Council to follow up the European Commission's strategic proposals and the European Parliament's resolutions on rail liberalisation.

"European companies want a clear deadline by which rail freight will be open to competition for both national and international transport" stated Mr Daniel Cloquet, UNICE's Director for Industrial Affairs.

On behalf of UNICE, EUROCHAMBRES, CEFIC, Eurocommerce and the European Shippers' Council, Mr Cloquet presented to President Gayssot a manifesto setting out the reasons why rail liberalisation is an absolute must for Europe's economic future, as well as to allow progress towards sustainable development. Liberalisation is also essential to reverse the decline of rail. Rail freight as a share of total land-based transport in the EU fell from 35% to 15% between 1970 and 1998 – over the same period it increased from 33% to 41% in the USA.

"Aware of what is at stake, the European Parliament has proposed the horizon of 2005 as the target for liberalisation. The business community welcomes this approach and urges the Council not to follow an ostrich-like policy whereby no timetable whatsoever would be set" said Mr Cloquet.

The solution for developing use of rail certainly does not consist in increasing taxation on road transport. On the contrary, it means improving the quality of rail services and reducing their cost. "A great deal can be learnt from the experience of Sweden, where price reductions prompted by liberalisation have already reached an average of 10%. Creation of an internal market in rail transport in line with the objectives adopted by Heads of State at the Lisbon European Council is one of the structural reforms needed to restore Europe's attractiveness as a region for investment" industry representatives pointed out.

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