



Risk Category

fall from height

Date

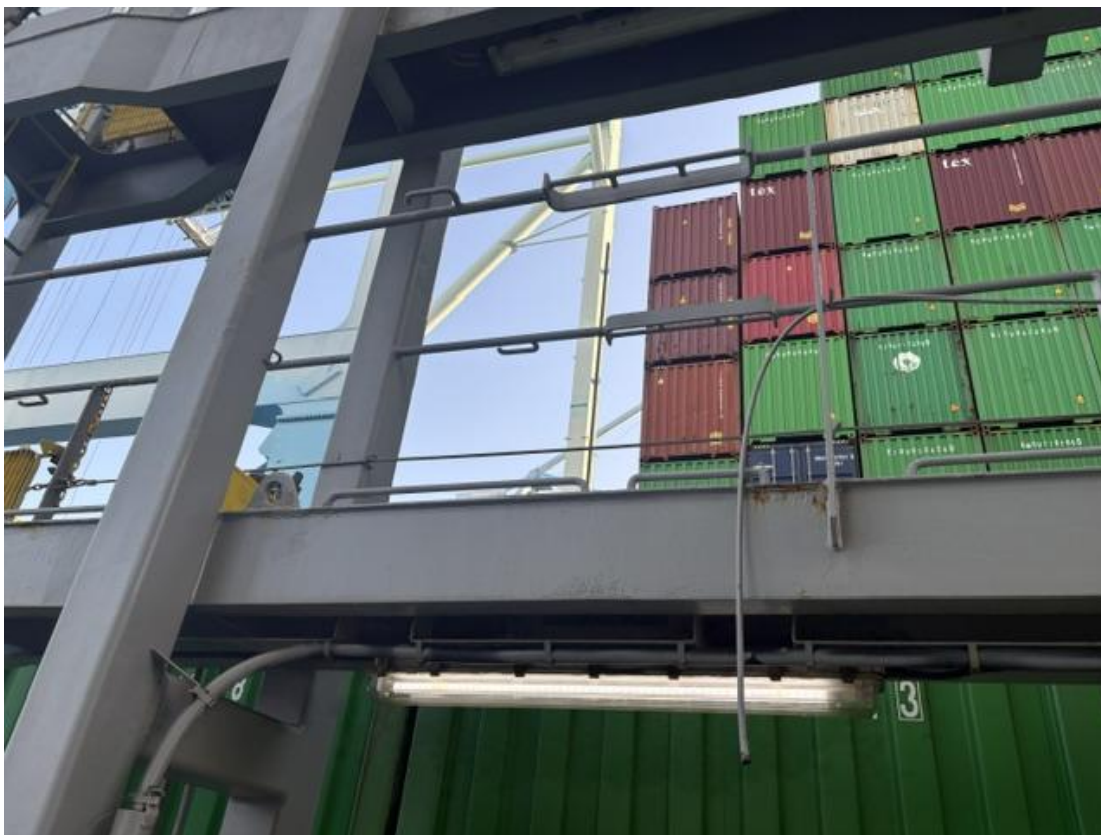
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Alert no:

4/26

Fatality during vessel operations

Mid-Rail Failure When Sat Upon



WHAT HAPPENED?

In one recent event, a foreman boarded a container vessel and was supervising container discharge operations from an elevated lashing bridge. The lashing bridge consisted of metal grating, a steel top rail and a plastic coated and painted cable mid rail. No obvious corrosion was evident. The lashing bridge was elevated approximately 2.5 meters above the hatch lids with an empty bay and hatch to one side and the full bay being worked on the other side.

While observing the discharge operation from the full bay, the foreman sat on the plastic coated and painted mid rail and approximately 15 seconds after sitting the mid rail failed resulting in the foreman falling backwards to the empty bay and hatch resulting in a fatal injury.

POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

☒ Fatality ☐ Serious Injury ☐ Environmental Damage

KEY LEARNING

- Top rails and mid rails guarding elevated walking/working surfaces are not designed to be stood or sat upon.
- Painted and coated cables and railings can make detecting corrosion difficult. Corrosion can occur at the point where cables rub against posts.
- Having an inspection program to identify and fix vessel hazards is an important management system for safe vessel operations.
- Stevedores that board vessels should be properly dressed with durable non-skid shoes, long pants, high visibility clothing, impact resistant or task specific gloves and hard hats with secure chin straps.
- Pre-shift toolbox talks should review vessel conditions, areas of risk and prohibition of using railings to sit or stand upon.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER TODAY

☐ Review risk assessment ☒ Verify controls ☒ Discuss alert
☒ Review competence/training

OPERATIONAL ALERTS

If you have similar operations, please share this Safety Alert and have a safety discussion with operation managers, supervisors, equipment operators, and all affected employees. It is imperative that management review their operational controls at all levels to mitigate similar hazardous conditions and/or acts.

COULD THIS HAPPEN HERE?

1. What prevents it happening in your organisation?
2. How do you know that controls are working?
3. What are the warning signs?
4. How do you ensure that the vessel is safe to operate?

INDUSTRY LEARNING

The featured incident is not an isolated event. ICHCA's data has 12 similar incidents.

A review of the 12 fatal falls involving stevedores, lashers and shore personnel working on board container vessels between 2014 and 2024 identified a recurring pattern of fatal falls from vessel structures, hatch covers, catwalks, lashing bridges, container stacks and vessel sides. Workers fell into cargo holds, onto decks or overboard into the water.

These fatalities occurred during normal activities such as cargo supervision, lashing and unlashings, lashing inspections, reefer connection work, container loading and simply moving between work locations. In several cases the individuals were experienced workers carrying out routine tasks.

Across the cases reviewed, the following themes repeatedly appeared:

- Working close to open cargo holds, hatch openings and vessel edges.
- Loss of balance while handling lashing rods or conducting inspections.
- Failure or deterioration of safety-critical structures such as railings.
- Workers operating alone, delaying emergency response.
- Inadequate control of work at height and open-edge exposure.
- Weak ship-shore communication, supervision and risk assessment.
- Poor visibility, disorientation or a lack of situational awareness.
- Normalisation of risk during routine activities.

A notable finding is that fatal outcomes were not limited to high falls. While several workers fell 12 to 18 metres into cargo holds or to lower levels, other fatalities resulted from falls of only 2 to 3 metres, demonstrating that any uncontrolled fall on board a vessel can have devastating consequences.

The industry cases reviewed included:

- Fall from a hatch cover into a cargo hold while conducting lashing inspections.
- Fall from a cross-deck following the failure of a corroded safety railing.
- Fall from an elevated lashing walkway during cargo operations.
- Fall into an open hold while connecting reefer power supplies.
- Falls from container stacks during loading and lashing activities.
- Falls overboard while handling lashing rods at outboard stows.
- Falls from vessel access structures and elevated working platforms.

CALL TO ACTION

Container vessels present a combination of open holds, elevated working positions, vessel edges, changing cargo configurations and temporary work areas. These hazards require continuous attention by both vessel and shore personnel.

Before cargo operations commence, operators should ensure:

- Railings, lashing bridges, catwalks and access structures are inspected and fit for purpose.

- Open hold and open-edge hazards are identified and controlled.
- Defective barriers or railings are treated as safety-critical defects.
- Work at height controls remain effective throughout cargo operations.
- Workers understand vessel-specific hazards and changing work conditions.
- Lone working in exposed areas is eliminated or strictly controlled.
- Ship and shore teams jointly review hazards and controls before work begins.

Every fall from height on a container vessel has the potential to be fatal. The repeated occurrence of these events across the industry demonstrates the need for constant vigilance, effective vessel inspections and robust controls to prevent workers from being exposed to uncontrolled fall hazards.

We recognise that fall risk is not exclusive to container vessel operations and learning from these incidents can also usefully be applied to fall risk on other cargo vessel types.

International Cargo Handling Coordination Association

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