



Mr Gilbert F. Hougbo  
Director-General  
International Labour Office (ILO)

R: ILO Director-General, 2026

C: [ilodirector-general@ilo.org](mailto:ilodirector-general@ilo.org)

cc: [roepke@ilo.org](mailto:roepke@ilo.org); [rgonzalez@ilo.org](mailto:rgonzalez@ilo.org)

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Dear Director-General,

Thank you for addressing the Council of Global Unions (CGU) on 15 January 2026. Your engagement was very much appreciated. At the meeting I mentioned that Public Services International (PSI) has several specific issues to raise, but instead of distracting the meeting would follow up afterwards.

I write to follow up and specifically to:

1. Outline how better addressing public sector issues at the ILO will increase the impact of the ILO's work and the success of your reform programme for little or no cost,
2. Provide concrete proposals for your consideration,
3. Offer PSI expertise and support for your reform programme, and
4. Request a meeting to discuss these issues.

#### The mismatch between the ILO mandate and its Public Service Sector capacity

At the ILO's foundation in 1919, and through the post war period, its structures and activities reflected the reality that national labour standards and relations were dominated by private sector bargaining – particularly in the manufacturing, transport and agricultural sectors.

Since the start of economic structural reforms in the 1980s, the nature of labour relations has changed significantly. The ILO has grappled with the implications of the rise of MNEs, platform work, AI and the need for a just transition. However, the implications of the large increase in public service sector resulting from the shift to a services economy has been largely ignored.

This is a pity because these workers include water, energy and waste workers, doctors, nurses, ambulance and care staff, forest rangers, firefighters, social protection workers, planning staff, libraries, engineers on public works, judicial, audit and anti-corruption body workers, teachers and researchers. In short, all the workers who make our society, democracy and economy work.

The ILO Centenary Declaration contains reference to the importance of public sector workers – yet there is no clear part of the ILO that has responsibility for public sector issues. There is only one staff position – in SECTOR – that aspires to provide public sector expertise, and it is currently vacant.

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#### [WWW.PUBLICSERVICES.INTERNATIONAL](http://WWW.PUBLICSERVICES.INTERNATIONAL)

Public Services International is a Global Union Federation of more than 700 trade unions representing 30 million workers in 154 countries. We bring their voices to the UN, ILO, WHO and other regional and global organisations. We defend trade union and workers' rights and fight for universal access to quality public services. PSI complies with European Union privacy legislation. Please refer to our [privacy policy](#) or contact [privacy@world-psi.org](mailto:privacy@world-psi.org), if you want to view, update or delete any of your contact details. Subscribe to our [mailing lists](#)

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This gap undermines the ILOs ability to fulfil its core mandate in the modern economy. Remedying the oversight will significantly increase impact for very little effort if approached smartly.

### Public Service Sector is core to ILO mandate and will increase impact

The ILO Centenary Declaration states that “[...] the ILO must direct its efforts to: [...] (x) supporting the role of the public sector as a significant employer and provider of quality public services”. Most areas of ILO work would benefit from a smarter approach to public sector issues.

A few examples include:

- Public service sector is the largest provider of **formal employment**: the public sector accounts for 10.9% of the world's total employment<sup>1</sup>, and in many developing countries (the ones most in need of expert advice and technical assistance) the public sector is the major provider of formal jobs, often employing 30-50% or more of formal sector workers.
- Public service sector now plays a leading role in **innovating and implementing new labour standards**. Increasingly, it is public sector employers who trial and are first movers in the implementation of fundamental standards, such as leave entitlements, pension schemes, gender equality, care responsibilities, and occupational safety and health – which if successful then spreads to the private sector.
- **Social Dialogue**: Public sector union density is significantly higher than private sector density (over four times larger in OECD countries). Public sector unions are often the largest unions at national level and must be engaged if social dialogue is to be successful.
- **Economic and employment growth**: OECD data highlights that government investment can create jobs and build resilience, with spending on physical and social infrastructure leading to long-term productivity boosts<sup>2</sup>. UN research indicates that investing in the health workforce produces a "triple return" of improved health outcomes, global health security, and economic growth<sup>3</sup>.
- **Skills**: Training and education rely on public sector workforce capacity to plan and deliver.
- **Women's access to employment**: The World Bank Worldwide Bureaucracy (2000-2018) highlights that female share of public sector employment is 64% in health and 57% in education. These sectors often provide the best pathways to employment for women and vulnerable workers - including on the ground via local government.
- **Migration**: Increasingly, labour migration is being driven by public sector skills shortages in areas such as health and care.
- **Peace and stability**: Trust in the social compact is critically linked to access to quality public services and unrest in many countries such as Chile, Egypt and Iran has been linked to public services failure in areas such as water, electricity, education and transport.
- **Poverty reduction**: World Bank research emphasises that public infrastructure investments reduce poverty, inequality, and vulnerability to climate change while promoting economic expansion<sup>4</sup>.
- **A Just Transition** cannot be achieved without addressing energy, water, waste, disaster response and emergency services, planning and transport – all sectors that have large or exclusive public service provision.
- **Effective and efficient regulation**: Governments act as the principal regulators and custodians of fundamental labour standards. Moreover, governments are critical to implement pension schemes, care responsibilities, labour inspection, employment policy, and other essential issues such as climate change action and disaster response.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ilostat.ilo.org/who-powers-the-public-sector/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/government-at-a-glance-2025\\_70e14c6c/full-report/government-investment-spending\\_023c3a29.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/government-at-a-glance-2025_70e14c6c/full-report/government-investment-spending_023c3a29.html)

<sup>3</sup> Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030, adopted in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/41681424-4459-4959-84d5-63709dee74dc/content>

- **Social justice:** Quality public services are the foundation for equitable and inclusive societies. Access to education, healthcare, public transport, water and sanitation, reduce inequalities by addressing systemic exclusion. Neglecting the labour force undermines provision of services.
- **Conflict zones:** Where public service workers are critical to service provision.

### There is demand from governments

We know from our engagement with governments that they are struggling to modernise the public sector whilst dealing with budget constraints, shortages of skilled staff, retaining talent, attracting young workers, labour migration (especially in health, care and waste), the digital transformation and AI. Anti-corruption and good governance are essential for social justice and economic development and rely critically on competent public service employees.

Whilst most **service delivery design is the core work of other UN agencies**; the **critical labour aspects are ILO core business**. The ILO is the only agency supporting these workers and protecting and promoting collective bargaining in the public sector, including critical areas such as nursing, firefighters, labour inspectors, financial control, forest rangers and nuclear power plant operators.

We already see these tensions generating the conditions for disputes and industrial action. Demand for expertise to address these issues places the **ILO in a unique position to provide such expertise and advice, and increase visibility**, as part of its core mandate.

### Ad Hoc success despite the gaps shows the large potential

Despite the challenges, the ILO has found opportunities for high value add work and PSI notes many willing ILO staff partners, even if scattered and uncoordinated. Examples include:

- 32 pending CEARC comments on C.151, showing that a strong normative system can be used to improve working conditions and that workers believe in the system.
- Public emergency services guidelines: complementing R.205 on crises and resilience which provides the ILO a tool to work with other agencies in a context of wars and climate change. PSI worked extensively with ILO to develop R.205 and we could have done much more to promote it.
- Protection of whistleblowers: The GB is currently discussing follow up to the conclusions of the technical meeting. Protecting whistleblowers helps prevent and denounce corruption.
- Biological Hazards in the Working Environment Convention, 2025 (No. 192): PSI engaged heavily and can support the ILO ratification campaign. This is crucial for waste, energy, sanitation and health workers.
- PSI supported ILO work with other agencies on the establishment of The Working for Health programme (W4H) - a joint initiative between the ILO, OECD and WHO to collaborate and support the implementation of the [recommendations of the 2016 United Nation Secretary-General's High-level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth](#) to stimulate investment in the health and care workforce. The ILO through W4H provides support at country, regional and global level.

**There is immediate future potential.** PSI is currently negotiating a global social dialogue agreement in local government with United Cities and Local Government. This is a first and historic event. **Signing this agreement at the ILO would raise profile and be an early win** for the reformed ILO.

### Concrete proposals for reform

We attach a one-page note outlining four complementary proposals for your consideration. Each is **budget neutral and would require little effort**. Collectively they will increase the impact of the ILO, create efficiencies, help offset the inevitable consequences of budget cuts and set up new areas of success for the ILO in future. They will ensure better co-ordination and contribute to your vision for a modern reformed ILO. These are not the only possibilities – but rather show what is possible.

## PSI Expertise

Public service unions have a long history of engagement with public sector reform and restructuring programs such the ILO is currently undertaking. We are unique in the labour movement in understanding the specific challenges and opportunities this reform provides at the political, operational, strategic and labour relations level.

PSI President Britta Lejon is the President of a large civil service union, and former State Minister of Democracy in Sweden. I was previously adviser to the Minister for Public Sector Management and then Director of Strategy at the Department of Premier and Cabinet in South Australia. Between us we have 50 years of experience in public service management and labour relations on both sides of the table. We have seen good and bad public sector reform and the difference it makes for future success.

We understand the financial pressures you must deal with and the need to eliminate duplication and trim non-core activity. However, too often these tasks crowd out the opportunities for improved co-ordination, changes to work practices, and the investment in high impact, core activities and staff that will underpin success post reform. As friends of the ILO, and your leadership, we offer our expertise in any way you think useful.

## Request to meet

I would be pleased to meet with you in the immediate future to discuss these issues and what longer term collaboration might involve.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Bertossa', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Daniel Bertossa**  
General Secretary  
Public Services International

**ATTACHMENT:** Options for ILO Strategic Focus on Public Services

## **Options for ILO STRATEGIC FOCUS ON PUBLIC SERVICES**

The following options provide expertise to ILO constituents and strengthen the role of public services within the organisation. They reflect the critical contribution of public services to decent work, social justice, and sustainable economic development while ensuring efficiency amidst budgetary constraints.

### **1. Visibility of public sector policies within the ILO**

Public Sector Services are invisible in the proposals for the sectoral delivery workstream. It should instead be structured around supply chains and public services as entry points, aligned with other ILO policy portfolios and programmes. This would guarantee the coverage of services that do not entirely fit in the supply chain organisation of labour, such as public administration, public safety and infrastructure, local government, much of health and care delivery, judicial and legislative activity, environment and climate action and education, among others.

### **2. Ensure Public Service expertise within current resources**

Maintaining and effectively deploying modest public sector specialist staff capacity will ensure public sector considerations are embedded in technical cooperation, normative work, and policy advice to advance the organisation's mandate and support ILO member States in addressing governance, institutional capacity, and workforce issues.

Of the more than 3,000 ILO staff, there must be more than one dedicated public sector specialist. The Public Sector specialist position in sector must be filled. Additionally, when filling current vacancies in ACTRAV, filling one position with a public services specialist would ensure an entry point for the more than 1,000 existing public service unions and numerous GUFs.

### **3. Public Sector Hub (PS Hub) for increased impact**

Two staff positions should be sufficient to establish a light, coordination-focused public sector hub, drawing on staff and specialists from existing departments and programmes already engaged in public sector work. Critically, the PS Hub would ensure integration and responsiveness to public service work in the field.

It would co-ordinate designated public sector focal points in each department and provide a single coordination mechanism for public sector-related engagement, facilitating collaboration among policy portfolios and programmes and ensuring a more integrated response to requests for support from governments and social partners. It would not create a new operational structure, rather better align, leverage and create synergies from existing expertise, resources, and interventions across the ILO.

### **4. Centre of Excellence in public service labour practices**

The ILO PS Hub should be tasked with scoping and establishing a small ILO led centre that would strengthen public sector expertise by promoting high-quality, evidence-based labour practices grounded in social dialogue and international labour standards. Resourced by the PS Hub and working with the Global Coalition for Social Justice, the Centre would operate as a network platform of academics, public administration institutions, and other stakeholders, that would consolidate ILO expertise, strengthen partnerships, and provide a focused platform to support governments and social partners in addressing public sector issues and challenges. PSI and EI would contribute their considerable existing expertise to establish the Centre's work.

Many governments, especially in the global south, would benefit from this expertise. Many other governments are concerned to ensure that Overseas Development Aid (ODA) is used efficiently and seek to ensure that countries receiving ODA use it well. A modest Centre of Excellence resourced from within the Hub would likely attract government donor money to expand work.