

United Nations

Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters

March 5th, 2013

UN Headquarters, New York

Speech by Rosa Pavanelli, General Secretary, PSI

Your excellencies, honourable delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to thank the organisers for inviting the voice of labour to this important event.

I speak to you today in the name of more than 20 million workers in 150 countries, members of trade unions affiliated to Public Services International.

I thank General Secretary Ban Ki moon who mentioned the fire-fighters in his speech, and recalled how much water disasters affect jobs and consequently livelihoods.

I ask for a more systematic inclusion of workers and trade unions in UN and national and local programmes. We stand for Decent Work, it is a prerequisite for the post-2015 agenda. We must recognise that the best way out of poverty is a decent job. Quality public services, accessible to all, are the basic building blocks of all prosperous societies.

Workers make our societies resilient to rebuild after extreme weather events – more frequent and severe under climate change.

On the screen you see our members at work. They are the first responders, the fire fighters, the doctors and nurses, the ambulance drivers. We are in the hospitals, in the water and sewage plants, in the electricity utilities as well as in the schools and on the bus and metro lines.

PSI awarded its 2012 Global Public Service Prize to Japanese union Jichiro, for its work in recovering from the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami. But today and in the future, we need better tools and training to do our jobs. Tools which governments must provide, instead of resorting to privatisation.

The private sector won't provide these tools and training because they are not committed to the mission of protecting people and communities as public services are. And they can't make enough profit.

We don't want to wait for another disaster to demonstrate the life-saving role of public services.

The right to safe and healthy workplaces is fundamental. Workers join trade unions for these protections, which are guaranteed under ILO Conventions but too often violated, by employers and governments.

Some countries don't even let their water and sanitation workers join trade unions. This is unacceptable and a violation of rights under the UN Charter.

How can you expect these workers to put themselves in harm's way when their rights are violated?

We expect all of you to fulfil your duties to respect workers' rights.

Involve us, increase training, include health and safety standards, improve equipment and communications for the workers going into the eye of the storm. Recognise the role of volunteers and informal workers, build them into the training and protection system to improve the preparedness and resilience. Coordinate services across the borders sharing knowledge and experiences to increase the effectiveness and reduce human and economic costs.

Also UN staff work in disaster relief, often in harsh conditions when other development agencies have gone.

In 2012, more than 30 UN staff were killed in disaster zones. As an organisation, the UN mandate requires you to be there. As an employer you have a duty to protect your staff. Plan better, listen more, commit to social dialogue with the union of your workers to make their work as secure as possible.

Tomorrow night, PSI organises a meeting of trade unions and community-based organisations who worked after super-storm Sandy. I invite you to hear how the National Nurses United and AFT send volunteers to disaster areas from Katrina to Haiti to New York. How the Teamsters union supplied to those most in need. Sanitation workers in AFSCME DC 37 helped clear debris and rebuild the systems, being called the unsung heroes by President Obama. Linesmen with the Utility Workers Union worked relentlessly to bring electricity systems back up, even though the private company Con Edison had neglected investments in infrastructure.

In the Philippines, in Germany and the UK, in Colombia and Chile, and everywhere it is needed our members are doing their jobs, demonstrating heroism, every day.

They are not doing it for profit, but out of a sense of public service.

Yet all the time, public services are being degraded, underfunded, privatised and made inaccessible for the most vulnerable.

I am counting on you to join us to reverse this trend!

Thank you