



Kommunal Congress, Stockholm, Sweden, 28 May 2013

Speech by Rosa Pavanelli, PSI General Secretary

Brothers and sisters, dear Annelie, and members of the boards, dear delegates. Thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity bring you the solidarity message of PSI – Public Services International on behalf of its 20 million members in more than 150 countries.

This Kommunal Congress is being held only a few months after the 29th PSI congress in Durban last November. It's a great opportunity for all of us to share our vision for the future, to discuss how to challenge and to win the very difficult fight that the neo-liberal forces are imposing on us right now.

In Durban we have renewed our commitment for Quality Public Services as the overarching campaign that will lead PSI and our affiliates around the world to work for more justice in our societies.

We know that quality public services are essential to ensure universal access to education, healthcare, social services, potable water and sanitation, to ensure that everybody can live in a safe environment where natural resources are protected for the present and future generations.

And we know that to enjoy these rights we need freedom and democracy.

Our world still suffers from war, xenophobia, racism and discrimination, inequality and deprivation. And the values we believe in are continuously put at stake by the neoliberal forces which are imposing an agenda of privatization and marketization of the common goods.

We are often told that conflicts have a political or sometimes religious origin, but we know that it's often a lie, that more and more frequently the origin of conflicts lies in economic reasons, for the control of the land, for the ownership of natural resources, mainly energy and water.

Even within the UN system, it is commonly recognised that the undeclared nature of the Syrian civil war resides in the fight for the control of water.

And we must be aware that public services are the new border of labour exploitation, where competition and social dumping are brought within our cities by unscrupulous brokers - or we should call them human being traffickers - where the precariousness of jobs and the unacceptable reduction of wages and working conditions are a threat that impacts on the rights of workers that our unions fought for many years to conquer. And these situations always bring more injustice and inequalities.

We know that the financial crisis and the consequent policy of austerity have put the burden of the disaster produced by the bankers on the shoulders of workers.

We know that this is one of the reasons for the success of the most conservative forces, the most regressive and authoritarian.

International Finance Institutions, starting with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, admit that austerity is not the solution, but they are not changing their strategies and if they continue to impose the same measures, their auto-criticism will be only the fig leaf on the shame of the neoliberal policy disaster.

At the same time, the global institutions are now starting a discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals post 2015. Notwithstanding the semantic shift from the previous MDGs (that hardly hides the failure of that strategy), the approach seems to indicate that global institutions are prepared to do all that is possible to be more compatible with the market hegemony.

We must be able to influence this discussion, to pretend that the Social Protection Floor coverage is provided by public services, to avoid that the market becomes even more aggressive and to put solidarity and justice on top of the agenda.

We work for a world of peace and democracy. We work for equality and justice. We know that, as the unions and workers who deliver public services, we are actually the key to making such a world possible.

We want our communities to continue to benefit from the welfare state model that has improved the living conditions of millions of European citizens. And we want the rest of the world to be able to achieve those standards of living. But to do that we need an economic system which privileges people over profit.

We know what it requires to run hospitals well, with well-educated and well paid professionals, where workers can freely organize in their unions and exercise their trade union rights. We know that a good water system requires public investment in infrastructures and maintenance, and democratic control to preserve the resource.

And we know how important an efficient and universal education system is in providing every boy and girl with the right to access the labour market. We know that quality social services can make the difference for women between being secluded at home and being free to get a job, as a fundamental condition for equality, not only between genders, but in society.

And we know that we need a fair tax system, based on progressivity and justice, to make all those public services accessible, sustainable and affordable.

This is the image of the future that we propose to our members and this is what we ask them to fight for.

So the uncertainty is not our vision for the future. The uncertainty lies in the circumstances that work against this vision.

Throughout the world, the political, social and economic situation has deteriorated. The political situation has also changed in Europe. In 2001 European states were led by social democratic- labour governments, with only a few exceptions. By 2012 the situation had completely inverted, with only few progressive governments remaining among an overwhelming majority of conservative and liberal governments.

Their policies are driving the increase of inequality in our communities. And we must look to the failure of the conservative government if, today, Sweden is the OECD country where inequality is on the steepest rise.

And maybe this is also one of the causes of the riots that only last week devastated the suburbs of this beautiful, inclusive and civil town of Stockholm and shocked the world, confirming the impression that what the world is globalising is the threat to the stability of our communities, making Stockholm looking like Paris, and Paris like Tunis, and Tunis like Mumbai.....

That's something unacceptable for those like our unions members who are committed to solidarity.

But outside of Europe the situation is just as grim. Too many PSI affiliates live in countries where union membership is not the norm, where union membership density is measured in single digits.

In many countries violence against trade unionists is common. In recent months, we've had members arrested in a number of countries, including Turkey. And in some countries being a trade unionist still means risking your life, like in Guatemala, as Annelie has just recalled.

We're seeing an increase in the number of countries where trade union rights are violated or circumscribed, where gender discrimination denies women access to decision-making structures or involvement in the activities of unions themselves.

PSI's response must be one which links building power with quality public services.

Cutting public services is bad for everyone, whether they're union members or not, both public and private workers. Whether they're men or women, young or old, migrant or resident.

The largest and most powerful economic players in the world see this period of austerity as a global opportunity to intensify the last 30 years of neoliberal ideology.

After having provoked the financial crisis in 2008, the financial markets are now back at work doing business as usual and working aggressively to roll back even further the protections of the state, to profit in every area, to speculate and to financialise all common goods.

Expanding precarious work with low wages, exploiting migrant workers and women, privatising and outsourcing services in the interests of private profiteers is the new frontier of globalisation, the new playing field for competition.

To challenge this trajectory we must be willing to affirm our interest in changing the balance of power. We must dare, as Annelie says. PSI must look to growth, to becoming larger and stronger.

By bringing these two strands together – how to be stronger while promoting quality public services – we can create new opportunities. In PSI we have put in place a strategy for growth and we are building new campaign capacities to focus globally on promoting quality public services.

Tax justice will be the core campaign of the next months. How can we have QPS if tax avoidance is systematic and legalized for the big corporations, if tax frauds in

Europe alone equal 1,000 billion euros, if tax havens are shelters to illegal business from all over the world?

PSI will strengthen its members campaigning on the right to water and other fundamental human rights.

These activities must be developed jointly with our work on strengthening trade union rights and union capacity building, including young workers, and forming coalitions with allies in the civil society.

It is particularly encouraging to hear that Kommunal has recorded membership growth in the present period and won a successful, precedent-setting new agreement for its members last month which included specific provisions for the low paid. These are examples that show the right way to confront the present austerity era.

Let me also comment on Kommunal's commitment to PSI. In the area of international solidarity, Kommunal has always taken a lead within PSI, and there are many PSI affiliates, currently in East Africa, Turkey and the Middle East, who are supported through Kommunal's commitment to trade union development cooperation.

The list is long, but let me just mention that Kommunal's support allowed PSI to organise our first Arab Women's Trade Union Leadership Conference, which brought together for the first time women leaders who have been part of the driving forces behind the Arab revolution. All these activities have contributed to strengthening unions around the world and consequently PSI representation.

And I'm confident that we can continue rooting our common solidarity commitment in the work to develop union capacity building where it is most needed.

Let me conclude by putting an eye on our past. As you know, I'm Italian, so I'm sure you understand.

In 1913, 100 years ago, PSI held its third Congress in Zurich. Kommunal's first president, Ludwig Norden, was present. The 1913 Congress was the first time that the conditions of public services workers were compared and strategies were developed to uplift all workers from an international perspective.

The Congress ended with the following appeal:

“The organised workers in public services are called upon to do more than hitherto to make their organisations influential factors, to strengthen them by exercising solidarity and spreading their message as well as recruiting workers who are still indifferent, to exploit their political rights to the full and to promote good representatives to safeguard their interests in parliamentary elections.”

The Congress also resolved:

“The best and most effective defence against all hostile attacks on the right to organise and to strike is the firm closing of ranks of all workers in public services in unitary organisations. The Third Congress calls on all employees in these services to create a strong, irresistible defensive phalanx which is able to withstand any attack.”

We rarely have enough time to consider the past, to assess ourselves and our directions. But 100 years later these words still ring true for PSI and its affiliates. These visions remain foundations to make us strong today. PSI and Kommunal have shared one century of history.

We must continue the work, with the same determination, the same commitment, and trust in solidarity and justice for our present members and for those who come after us. I am confident they will benefit from another 100 years of solidarity, internationalism and comradeship.

And this is also my wish for your Congress.

Viva Kommunal. Viva public services workers.