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Dear Colleagues,

The outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EBV) has become a global emergency. Many factors have contributed to the spread of the epidemic; one of these is the fact that the awareness raised by health trade unions remained unheard for months.

Public Services International affiliated health workers' unions in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone first warned their employers, their governments and the media of the threat of Ebola early in 2014. Five months later, faced with the spread of the disease, including new cases in Nigeria - and the danger to health care workers in particular, the international community is mobilising. And these same health workers' unions, as well as those in other countries, stand ready to support efforts to stop the spread.

According to WHO figures, 129 nurses and doctors have died in the last months and the adoption of measures to protect health workers from the contagion is still too slow. While abnegation, and often the extreme sacrifice, of health workers, is celebrated by public opinion and the international community, prejudice and stigma against those who work close to patients are expanding due to the fear of contagion bringing violence and riots into local communities.

On August 16th, the attack at a quarantine centre in Liberia resulted not only in the dispersal of 17 patients, but in the pillage of essential medical supplies that had just been delivered to the centre. Nurses were left with the remaining Ebola patients, but without protective equipment.

The international community is coordinating efforts to contain the spread, and the WHO has instructed governments and institutions to take measures to protect health workers, including:

- *"...ensure all necessary measures are taken to mobilize and remunerate the necessary health care workforce...*
- *...ensure that sufficient medical commodities, especially personal protective equipment (PPE), are available to those who appropriately need them, including health care workers, laboratory technicians, cleaning staff, burial personnel and others that may come in contact with infected persons or contaminated materials...*

- *...ensure health care workers receive: adequate security measures for their safety and protection; timely payment of salaries and, as appropriate, hazard pay; and appropriate education and training on IPC, including the proper use of PPEs...*
- *...ensure that: treatment centres and reliable diagnostic laboratories are situated as closely as possible to areas of transmission; that these facilities have adequate numbers of trained staff, and sufficient equipment and supplies relative to the caseload; that sufficient security is provided to ensure both the safety of staff..."*

These necessary instructions will fail to be effective if there will not be a full involvement of workers representatives at local level, as unfortunately PSI's affiliates experience testifies. Moreover, beyond health professionals, janitors, drivers and burial staff require protection and prevention.

Health trade unions are present at national and local level where they can play a significant role in supporting workers and local communities. Trade unions must be part of the process to help, support and accompany the adoption and implementation of adequate measures to protect workers as well as contributing to fight the stigma and avoid violence in the communities.

The ILO can effectively contribute to overcome this crisis by favouring the participation of trade unions at all levels. The ILO contribution on OHS will be particularly important, but also the implementation of an appropriate social protection floor for health workers and their families in the affected areas.

In PSI, we also believe that the Ebola epidemic is another example of the deep need for a programme to prepare public services workers in case of disasters, whether we consider natural or man-made disasters or epidemics as in the current case.

PSI is supporting the West African Health Sector Unions' Network – WAHSUN to continue the work already started, which includes to:

- Mobilise all unions in the region to raise awareness of EVD and promote appropriate behaviour to avoid contagion and to use medical services;
- Work with the various local, national and regional/global actors to ensure that all workers coming in contact with EVD are appropriately trained and protected, including with tools and personal protective equipment (promote the hashtag #protecthealthworkers through social networks);
- Assist our members and all workers to receive this equipment and ensure they have the necessary training and conditions to work safely;
- Work with national governments to ensure that appropriate social protection systems are in place, including for the families of workers killed in the line of duty.

We call on ILO to inform the appropriate offices of the working conditions of our members on the front lines and to seek immediate ILO support for remedial actions, as well as long term support for workers involved in disasters.

Best regards.



Rosa Pavanelli
PSI General Secretary