

# 106 YEARS OF STEADFAST SERVICE:

## The Public Servants Association at the Crossroads of History and Modernity



06 July 2026

---

As the Public Servants Association (PSA) marks its 106<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 7 July 2026, the Union stands as a testament to resilience, adaptation, and unwavering advocacy for public-sector workers. Founded on 7 July 1920 through the merger of the Public Service Union and the Civil Servants Association in Pretoria, the PSA has grown from a small collective addressing poor working conditions into the largest politically non-affiliated trade Union in the country, representing over 245,000 public servants, pensioners, and employees in state institutions.

This milestone offers a moment not only for celebration but for frank reflection on the PSA's journey, its tangible achievements, and the formidable challenges confronting both the PSA and the evolving public workspace in an era of rapid technological and economic disruption.

### **Pre-1994: Foundations in Adversity**

The PSA's early decades were forged in the crucible of colonial and apartheid-era public service, where conditions were often exploitative and benefits minimal. From its inception, the PSA tackled core issues like housing, healthcare, and fair remuneration. As early as 1928, it raised demands for housing and medical aid. By the 1950s and 1960s, its advocacy yielded concrete gains: the introduction of a housing subsidy scheme, cost-of-living allowances, improved transfer compensation, and extensions of benefits to temporary employees.

The PSA played a pioneering role in establishing structures like the Civil Service Benevolent Fund and negotiating for better salaries and conditions through the 1940s. It expanded member services with canteens, holiday resorts, and training initiatives, demonstrating a holistic approach to worker welfare long before such practices became standard. Women's rights advanced incrementally, with the Union supporting permanent appointments for women in the early 1970s and breaking glass ceilings over time.

These were not easy victories. Operating under a repressive regime, the PSA maintained independence while pushing for incremental reforms. Its growth, from a few thousand members in the 1920s to tens of thousands by mid-century, reflected both member trust and the Union's effectiveness in an environment hostile to organized labour. The PSA's non-partisan stance allowed it to focus on professional advocacy rather than political alignment, a principle it upholds today.

### **Post-1994: Transformation and Collective Bargaining in Democracy**

The advent of democracy in 1994 ushered in a new chapter. The PSA actively contributed to the transformation of the public service, helping to diversify its ranks and align it with constitutional values of equity and inclusivity. It successfully transitioned into a fully representative Union for the new democratic dispensation, advocating for the full spectrum of South Africa's population.

Under the framework of the 1995 *Labour Relations Act*, the PSA has leveraged collective bargaining to secure improvements in remuneration, medical aid, notably through schemes like Government

Employees Medical Scheme GEMS, pensions, housing subsidies, working hours, leave, and occupational health and safety. It has been vocal on issues ranging from salary increases and overtime payments to combating unsafe working conditions and infrastructure decay in public facilities.

Post-apartheid achievements include defending members against unfair reforms, pushing for ethical governance, and expanding corporate social investment programmes that support communities, education, and vulnerable groups. The Union has addressed brain drain, ghost workers, and the need for better resource allocation in a constrained fiscal environment. Its affiliation with FEDUSA in 2017 strengthened its voice without compromising independence.

Yet, frank assessment reveals shortcomings in the broader public service that the PSA has highlighted: persistent inefficiencies, corruption in government departments, uneven service delivery, and budget pressures that strain worker morale and capacity. While the PSA has secured gains, systemic challenges like loadshedding, youth unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure continue to undermine the public service's potential. The PSA's calls for accountability, insourcing of essential services, and cybersecurity improvements reflecting a realistic acknowledgment that advocacy must confront these realities head-on.

### **Navigating a Rapidly Modernising World: The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digital Disruption**

Today's public servants operate in a workspace profoundly altered by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), digitalisation, automation, and hybrid work models accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The PSA has produced thoughtful positions on working from home, the changing nature of work, and digital skills gaps, recognising both opportunities and threats.

Opportunities abound. Digital tools can enhance efficiency, improve service delivery (e.g., e-governance), and create flexible conditions that support work-life balance. Investments in training and youth leadership programmes position the Union to equip members for these shifts.

However, challenges are stark and demand urgent attention. Automation and AI risk job displacement or deskilling in administrative and routine public-service roles. Many workers face digital literacy deficits, while infrastructure gaps, exacerbated by loadshedding and uneven connectivity, hinder effective adoption. Remote and hybrid work introduces new issues around oversight, mental health, data privacy, and the erosion of traditional collective organising spaces. Cybersecurity breaches expose vulnerabilities that threaten both workers and citizens.

The PSA like other unions grapples with fragmented workplaces, precarious employment trends, and the corporate power dynamics embedded in digital platforms. Organising in a digital age requires innovative strategies, from virtual engagement to policy advocacy for just transitions. The PSA's emphasis on reskilling, ethical governance, and protecting workers from being "left behind" owing to technological shifts is commendable but must intensify. Without proactive involvement in shaping 4IR policies, through social dialogue with government and employers, unions risk diminished relevance.

Budget constraints, policy volatility under coalition governments, and the hollowing out of institutional capacity further complicate the landscape. The PSA has rightly warned of brain drain and the need for dignified treatment of public servants as the backbone of the state.

### **A Call to Renewed Purpose**

The PSA's 106-year legacy is one of ground-breaking advocacy, life-changing benefits for members, and growth amid adversity. It has evolved from securing basic allowances to championing transformation, digital adaptation, and social responsibility. Yet, in a frank light, sustaining this requires confronting uncomfortable truths: the public service's performance gaps, the Unions need for internal renewal, and the existential pressures of modernisation.

As the PSA celebrates this anniversary it reaffirms its vision as the leading, politically non-aligned Union of Choice. Its future relevance hinges on continued assertiveness in bargaining, investment in member development especially the youth, and collaborative yet critical engagement on digital and economic reforms.

Public servants deserve a union that not only commemorates its past but actively forges a resilient future. In doing so, the PSA honours its founders while equipping today's workers for the challenges ahead. Here's to the next century of service rooted in justice, equity, and unyielding commitment to the public good.

*Happy 106<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, PSA.*