



**CELEBRATING WORKER'S MONTH:
A time to reflect and set a new agenda
for the Public Servants Association (PSA)**

The worker in general, and the public servant in particular, is under siege. The economy is imploding. The global economy is in dire straits, struggling to recover fully from years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The wheels of modernisation are running fast, with the growth of Artificial Intelligence threatening to send many workers out of jobs and replacing them with machines.

Geo-political stability is shaking, affecting global trade and the movement of goods, as the world's super powers flex their muscles against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukraine war. The recent un-diplomatic public spat between the USA and South Africa over the sale of arms has made it clearer that we will soon be entangled in this ongoing war, if not so already. The implications of this would be dire for the livelihoods of the general public as it would be for the public servants.

Meanwhile, here at home there is political turmoil brewing, threatening the stability of the country. As witnessed in the sporadic uprisings and the frequent threats of shutdowns, it is becoming clearer that the rising inequalities in society are resulting in a powder-keg waiting to explode. The flames of political instability are starting to burn and will soon be too difficult to extinguish.

The possibility of a total collapse of the electricity grid is no longer a distant threat, but a reality waiting to happen. When it does, it will leave no single worker unaffected. Jobs will be lost; food security will be threatened; and water supply will be scarce. A disastrous welfare crisis is in the making!

The public servant is, indirectly, blamed for poor services in communities on the one hand and for the so-called bloated public-service structure and the increasing public service wage bill on the other. Whispers about downsizing the public service are echoing in the corridors of power. Political opportunists, populists, and demagogues alike are, in their pursuit for power, making veiled threats and promising to privatise state-owned enterprises, if not to close them down. All these are threats to the livelihood of the worker, the public servant, and many a household.

Some speak in forked tongues, promising reforms on the one side whilst on the other hollowing the public service – through corruption and colluding – of its capacity to deliver on its mandate. The talk of a capable state is now a mere rhetoric, loss of meaning, direction, and significance. The voice of the upright and righteous public servants is suppressed and threatened as whistle blowers are murdered in broad daylight, with no hope of protection and justice.

All these issues point to the fact that we need to craft a new agenda and repurpose ourselves as a national union representing the majority of workers in the public service. If anything, this is the time for us to intensify our efforts to fight for justice for the ordinary worker. Whilst a lot has been achieved over the years and there are many milestones to be celebrated, the fight for justice is not over.

Indeed, the month of May is a time for commemoration and celebrating the struggles of workers globally. Our country, South Africa, has since the advent of democracy, given official recognition of May Day, as a Workers' Day to commemorate and remember the contribution of workers in the fight against apartheid – the struggle for democracy in South Africa. The labour movement, in general, has played a crucial role towards the democratisation of South Africa and is duly recognised for its contribution. Hence, the new democratic government recognised this day as an official day in the political calendar of South Africa.

However, this year's May Day celebration took place under very difficult and strenuous conditions for the workers across the globe. Gilbert Hougbo, the Director-General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), characterisation of this year's May Day celebration could not have been more apt. In his statement on the occasion to mark International Workers Day, 1 May 2023, Gilbert Hougbo observed that this year's celebrations were taking place under conditions in which "Globally, real wages have fallen, poverty is rising, and inequality seems more entrenched than ever. Enterprises have been hard-hit. Many could not cope with the cumulative effects of recent unexpected events. Small and micro-enterprises were particularly affected, and many have ceased operations." This is as true for the world as it is reflective of the situation here at home.

Hence, the PSA must use this as an opportune moment to take stock of the Union's achievements and reflect on the struggles ahead. We need to use this time for the repurposing and redefining of the Union's agenda. That agenda cannot, however, be framed and defined in a top-down approach. It must be organic and refashioned from the grassroots.

There are critical questions that the Union's general membership needs to have a voice on as the PSA redefines its agenda. These include both global and domestic issues that have implications for the well-being of members. For instance, we need to ask questions like: What the PSA's position should be if our country is at the very least made to suffer the wrath of economic sanctions resulting from the stance on the Russia-Ukraine war? What position should the PSA take if we are, at all, dragged into full-blown war? What should the PSA propose in the face of the drive for mechanisation of the workplace? How should the PSA respond to the ongoing threat of the privatisation of state-owned enterprises? How do we ensure the health and safety of workers in the age of pandemics and wars? Lastly, and most importantly, how to ensure unity and solidarity amongst workers in a polarised world order?

The reality is that the phase we are entering in our struggle is a phase that may require the level of radicalism and militancy that is not historically associated with the PSA. Yes, it has been said that the pen can be mightier than the sword, but we may as well have entered the phase where paper tigers would no longer be as effective as taking to the streets. This is a phase in which, if we do not fight, we risk our own extinction as a Union, as a credible movement in the public service. We cannot go down without a fight!

It is therefore proposed that the PSA must undertake a survey amongst members to collate the views of its general membership in shaping the new direction and agenda of the movement.

However, for the outcome to be credible and to minimise bias, the survey must be conducted by an independent research team.

These are difficult times in the lives of workers. These times require a different approach. The PSA must adapt its strategies and tactics all the time to secure its relevance and purpose as a true representative of the plight of workers. The time for a new agenda is now. Let us shape it together!

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