

## In confronting the climate crisis, workers are a critical part of the solution

*Guest blog for the “Caribbean Voices for Climate Justice” series by Sandra Massiah, Public Services International (PSI)  
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Every day, whether it is during or outside of the hurricane season, people who live and work in SIDS know only too well that climate change is a reality and that it affects everything that they do. Workers especially feel first-hand the impact of increasingly intense hurricanes, floods, longer periods of drought, and intense heat. **Public services workers are on the frontlines responding to the impact of the climate crisis. And perhaps better than anyone, they know that there is a very high price to pay for inaction.**

Frontline responders to climate and other disasters know that the world has to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and better manage climate risks. They know that working collectively in their trade unions, their **demands for system change** are what constitute the true answer to tackle the climate crisis. This **system change can only happen through government-led action and investment.**

For the vast majority of countries, and especially in the case of developing countries, without strong and progressive interventions from the public services sector (locally, nationally and regionally) much of the agenda set by the Nationally Determined Contributions ([NDCs](#)) to reduce emissions or [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 13 on Climate Action](#) will not be possible. Effective implementation of the SDGs requires a well-resourced public service sector.

*“None of the sustainable development goals can be achieved without bold and innovative efforts from public institutions and public servants. The ideas and creativity of civil servants have never been more important.”* - Under-Secretary-General Wu Hongbo, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Caribbean public services unions affiliated to [Public Services International](#) (PSI)<sup>1</sup> are making critical interventions in the [global fight for climate justice](#). *“Climate Change: Building Trade Union Capacities and Quality Public Services for a Just Transition”* is a project supported by [Union to Union](#) and Swedish trade unions [Akademikerförbundet SSR](#), [Vision](#) and [Kommunal](#). PSI’s affiliates in Jamaica, Saint Lucia and Dominica lead the project work in the Caribbean<sup>2</sup>.

One of the project’s aims is to enhance public services trade unions’ understanding of the challenges posed by the climate crisis to sustainable development and the future of work itself. This awareness provides opportunities for public services trade unions to contribute through social dialogue and social

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<sup>1</sup> Public Services International is a Global Union Federation (GUF) representing 30 million women and men in 154 countries who deliver valuable public services. PSI champions human rights, advocates for social justice and promotes universal access to quality public services. PSI works with the United Nations system and in partnership with labour, civil society and other organisations. We advocate for pro-public, government led climate action at key forum such as the UN CoP meetings. We link the climate issue with the wider fight for economic justice.

<sup>2</sup> PSI has 22 affiliates in the English, Dutch and French-speaking Caribbean.

partnerships to ensure social justice and decent work through a **just transition**.

Public services unions use the experiences and knowledge of its members to **influence public policy**. **In the Caribbean, public services unions are working to:**

- Improve public service delivery, create new jobs and consider direct and indirect climate impact
- Ensure that there are vulnerability assessments for different categories of public services workers and the general public
- Secure strong investment in the public sector
- Integrate gender dimensions and take into account persons with disabilities and the concerns of other equity seeking groups
- Promote and achieve reduced emissions through public renewable energy systems

Important in all the efforts is the **understanding that it is through strong public investment that countries can make the needed difference**. This is why public services trade unions **advocate and bargain** for:

- Urban and rural development & public transportation systems
- Equitable regulatory systems
- Well-resourced emergency and disaster preparedness mechanisms
- Strengthened public operators in the water and sanitation sectors

Public services trade unions also lobby and advocate for fairness to workers as they move to greener, more sustainable jobs. This means that public services unions must:

- Address worker-focused concerns and promote the deep transformation that is needed to manage the climate
- Use tripartite mechanisms to ensure that policies are fair to all. No one must be left behind.
- Work together with governments to improve public service delivery and create new jobs
- Work together with communities to radically mitigate and adapt for climate change
- Integrate gender dimensions and take into account persons with disabilities and the concerns of other equity seeking groups

**Working with allies**, public services trade unions are fighting to ensure that climate change issues are integrated into public policy. Public services trade unions use their strength and power to:

- Enhance working conditions and job security without causing detriment to wages
- Engage with women and vulnerable groups to promote their full involvement in making decisions about climate change
- Protect the most exposed workers in carbon-intensive sectors

Further, as Caribbean governments focus much of their work and energies on building resilience and “building back better” in the wake of Category 5 Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, Hurricane Dorian in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, PSI and its affiliates have also added their perspectives on what this means for the Caribbean.

Resilience in this context is usually defined by the inter-locking areas of structural resilience, financial

resilience, and quick recovery through emergency-response, access to rapid financing, and contingency planning. Too often, many see resilience in a very narrow context and think only of construction guidelines for homes and offices, roads and utilities. PSI and its affiliates in the Caribbean see **resilience in a much broader sense**. This involves strengthening every sector in the society – public health systems, agriculture, water and sanitation, renewable energy, housing, land use, education and training. It means taking account of and meeting the needs of the vulnerable in society, promoting gender equality and equity, social justice and decent work.

Public services trade unions in the Caribbean are very much present and active in the fight against climate change and for climate justice. As social partners they are articulating their perspectives on the climate chaos we face. They are signaling their eagerness to engage with other climate actors in thoroughly defining and promoting **just transition** - a transformation that puts people and the planet at the centre. This means not only dealing with changes brought about by the future of work. It is about system change.

### About Sandra Massiah and PSI



Sandra Massiah is Sub-regional Secretary for the Caribbean at Public Services International (PSI). PSI is a Global Union Federation representing 30 million public workers, bringing their voices to the United Nations, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization and other global and regional organisations. PSI defends trade union and workers' rights and fights for universal access to quality public services. PSI works on critical issues such as the climate crisis; promoting public and gender-responsive models of care; public

financing for development; more progressive corporate tax rules; universal social protection systems; universal public health services; digitalization; and the future of public services.

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