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Dear Dr Ghebreyesus,

Shortages of PPE: an emergency situation

I must start by commending the exemplary leadership that you are providing with WHO staff in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have been in daily touch with members of our affiliates across the world, united in commitment and taking action in their different ways at this grim historic moment. This has included our organising a series of webinars during which members on the front line in countries most hit, such as Italy, South Korea and Japan, have shared their experiences.

They repeatedly identified the severe shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff who are spending long hours in direct contact with infected patients, and the shortage of ventilators and medical supplies – including disinfectants – as major obstacles to the response. This crucial problem is also being stressed by health workers in other countries as they prepare to combat transmission of COVID-19 infection.

There is no doubt that this is an emergency within the global emergency, which if not frontally addressed with the urgency it deserves, will worsen an already grave situation. We do not want health workers to become dead heroes. And we need as many health workers as possible to be alive and healthy to keep up the good work they are doing.

Extraordinary measures are urgent to avoid an even bigger tragedy. I thus would urge you to call on WHO Member States to, without delay, take all possible initiatives (requisition, contingency alert or conversion of production) to order factories in their countries to expand local manufacture of PPEs and medical supplies. The Italian

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government has taken initiatives in this sense. We understand that these are extreme measures, but if that was possible during World War II and the Korean War in countries like the United States and South Korea, it must be possible to do so now to fight against the devious collective enemy that is this pandemic.

Humankind is at war. Solidarity requires action such as this. And the sooner such steps are taken, the better the chances of stemming the global tide of the pandemic and recovery of the global economy. It is also important to note that in countries which have already witnessed surges of cases, response has been hampered by overcrowding in understaffed health facilities.

Spain has taken the bold step of requisitioning private hospitals across the country. Italy and France have ordered private hospitals to accept and treat COVID 19 patients. This is a step we strongly believe countries across the world should take. Governments must put the people's health first without any equivocation. And that is why PSI is calling for "Public Health, Once and for All". The arrowhead of this stand presently, is a "Safe Workers Save Lives" campaign.

We do realise that at this juncture all hands must be on desk to defeat the pandemic. But as you have rightly pointed out, it is not enough to "throw money at an outbreak and when it's over we forget about it". If world leaders continue this way, we would be "dangerously unprepared for the next pandemic". And achieving universal health care might remain an aspiration that is never attained.

This crisis must thus mark the point where we break the "cycle of panic and neglect". An important starting point would be for governments to implement the recommendations of the United Nation's Secretary General's High-Level Commission on Health Employment (ComHEEG) and Economic Growth and own the "Working for Health" Five-Year Action Plan for Health Employment and Inclusive Growth.

If concrete steps had been adequately taken by world leaders to invest in health and address the envisaged shortfall of 18 million healthcare workers as identified by the ComHEEG, we would have been better prepared for the new coronavirus pandemic.

We are happy to work closely with you on this immediate emergency and the steps to take immediately after, which we must define from now. The tens of millions of members of PSI affiliates across 154 countries are committed to take action to lobby governments and mobilise public opinion for the necessary actions that have to be taken with the sense of urgency these require.

While looking forward to your favourable consideration of my proposals, do be reassured of our solidarity with you at this challenging hour for humankind.

Yours truly,



Rosa Pavanelli
General Secretary