



PSI GLOBAL FIREFIGHTERS' NETWORK



Background and rationale

- **Firefighters: a strategic public service**

Firefighters provide an essential public service that is increasingly strategic in today's world. As a distinct group within Public Emergency Service (PES) workers, they are primarily employed by local and regional governments (LRGs), although in some countries they operate as national services. Firefighters stand on the front lines of the escalating impacts of climate change, extreme weather events, and natural or human-made disasters—including floods, wildfires, tornadoes, and conflicts. Their mission is critical to protecting lives, public health, the environment, strategic utilities (such as energy and water plants, waste incinerators, and nuclear or military sites), as well as economic infrastructure and public institutions. The accelerating climate crisis means firefighters are now responding to more frequent and intense wildfires, longer heat seasons, and widespread water scarcity. They also play a vital role in multi-professional PES teams, working alongside health and ambulance personnel as first responders in war zones, terrorist attacks, pandemics and other large-scale public emergencies.

- **Firefighters face deep decent work deficits and multiple OSH risks.**

Firefighters face a combination of decent work deficits and severe occupational safety and health (OSH) risks. In many countries, firefighters lack full access to freedom of association and collective bargaining—fundamental international labour and human rights. Despite consistent [decisions of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association](#) affirming firefighters' full entitlement to union rights, legal and practical restrictions persist in many countries.¹ The [2018 ILO Guidelines on Decent Work in Public Emergency Services \(PES\)](#) - which cover firefighters as part of PES - affirm that "*the unique and essential role of PES workers should not be used as a justification to deny their participation in effective social dialogue mechanisms*". Firefighters face daunting Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) risks and are particularly vulnerable to a wide range of both physical and psychosocial risks, biological hazards, exposure to carcinogenic substances (e.g. asbestos, PFAS, flame retardants, plastic polymers, smoke, ashes, etc.) and third-party violence as they deal directly with service users. In 2022, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a World Health Organisation (WHO) body, declared that occupational exposure as a firefighter as carcinogenic, meaning that the profession can be carcinogenic by its very nature.² Yet, despite abundant scientific evidence, many countries hesitate and seek to avoid recognising

¹ For example, Japan ratified C.87 (1965) and C.98 (1953). However, section 2(1) of the Labour Union Act (Act No. 174 of 1 June 1949) bars firefighters from joining trade unions. PSI affiliated union JICHIRO continues to work to win recognition for Japanese firefighters and other public service workers of their fundamental rights to organize and bargain collectively and has raised the issue on multiple occasions with the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards with PSI's support. See PSI, [Trade Union Rights, Employment Conditions and Labour Relations in the LRG Sector](#), (2021).

² IARC, [Occupational Exposure as a Firefighter](#), IARC Monographs on the Identification of Carcinogenic Hazards to Humans Volume 132 (2023). The study recognises, among others, that there is enough evidence in humans to establish that firefighting is a cancerogenic profession because of occupational exposure to substances that are clearly recognised as cancerogenic. In addition, the study establishes a link between firefighters

several forms of cancers as occupational diseases linked to work-related exposure as a firefighter. Gender equality and non-discrimination also require renewed attention in this traditionally male-dominated profession.

- **Resource constraints, inadequate staffing levels and other labour challenges**

Chronic understaffing, lack of resources, and inadequate infrastructure, poor working conditions, increased reliance on volunteers, and growing risks are making recruitment and retention in fire services increasingly difficult, even in high-income countries. Legislation governing firefighting—covering rights, OSH, training, pay, and career progression—varies widely across countries. Local and regional governments (LRGs) often lack the financial and institutional autonomy to recruit, train, and equip firefighters adequately. As a result, the capacity of governments at all level to respond to crises is very disparate. Many developing nations still lack a fully functioning fire service, leaving them ill-prepared to meet their preparedness, mitigation and response capacity state obligations under the [UNDRR Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction \(2015-2030\)](#).

PSI Work on Firefighters

- Public Services International (PSI) represents thousands of firefighters through its affiliates—both firefighter-only unions and broader public sector unions. However, several firefighter unions are not yet affiliated with PSI. Connecting all firefighter unions within PSI is essential to strengthen their collective global voice and union power.
- [PSI has supported and defended the trade union rights of firefighters](#), building campaigns and filing complaints at the ILO against states that breached it, obtaining remarkable wins such as in the case of [Korea](#). It has also supported them during Covid times seeking recognition for their role and demanding adequate resources to carry out their mandates.
- PSI and its regions have also convened firefighter workshops and networks:
 - In Europe, the European Public Service Unions (EPSU) runs a vibrant EPSU Firefighters Network that meets annually and actively influences EU policy, especially on OSH.
 - In Asia-Pacific: PSI held a [regional firefighter workshop in Manila in 2015](#). More recently, a firefighter workshop was held on 10 September 2025 during its Asia Pacific Regional Conference (APRECON), Kathmandu (Nepal).
 - At the ILO [PSI coordinated affiliates' contributions and firefighters' input to the ILO Tripartite Expert Meeting \(2018\)](#), which produced the [ILO Guidelines on Decent Work in Public Emergency Services \(PES\)](#).
- Firefighters were also highlighted during the drafting of the recent ILO [Convention on Biological Hazards in the Working Environment](#) (C. 192) and its [accompanying Recommendation \(R. 209\)](#), where firefighters fall under Art. 7 (2) (c) (i) *sectors and occupations where workers are at a high risk of recognized harm due to exposure to biological hazards* hence deserving specific protections from biological hazards. During the tripartite negotiations, PSI used many examples of contamination from biological hazards provided by firefighters on duty.

A global picture on the working conditions of firefighters is missing

- Although the ILO in 2022 declared the [right to a safe and healthy working environment as the 5th fundamental principle of Decent Work](#), there has been no updated global assessment of firefighters' OSH conditions since 2012.³ Recognizing this gap, PSI submitted a proposal in 2025 to the ILO's Sectoral Department for a "Global Review of the Working Conditions of Firefighters (2025–2026)". The study

occupational exposure and mesothelioma and bladder cancer. It also shows data correlations between with cancers of the colon, prostate and testicles.

³ ILO, International Hazard Datasheets on Occupation, "[Fire-fighter](#)" (2012)

would have examined firefighters' situation through the lens of climate change, biological hazards, and new global risks such as conflicts and terrorist attacks analysing challenges and issuing recommendations. However, the proposal was not pursued by the ILO.

- Consequently, PSI is launching its own global consultation among firefighter unions to collect and analyse information on their working conditions, rights, and challenges. Firefighter unions can contribute to this effort filling out a [dedicated survey](#). This effort aims to start building a the first comprehensive global snapshot of current situation of the profession, to inform PSI's advocacy and policy work, and to shape future joint international action. A preview of survey findings will be presented at the [PSI Global Firefighters' Network](#) meeting on 27 November 2025.

Towards a PSI Global Firefighters Network

- In recognition of firefighters' vital public role and the persistent deficits in their labour rights, PSI is progressively establishing a PSI Global Firefighters' Network — a dedicated global community to:
 - Unite firefighters' unions worldwide, build their union power and strengthen their collective voice;
 - Provide a united sectoral interface for dialogue and advocacy with subnational/national employer counterparts and relevant multilateral organisations (e.g. ILO, WHO, OECD, UNDRR, COP, etc.);
 - Provide a shared platform for international campaigns (e.g. International Firefighter Day, May 4th);
 - Establish a regular policy forum to facilitate peer learning, build solidarity, enable rapid mobilization and mutual support;
 - Develop joint strategies to address the specific professional and sectoral challenges of firefighters;
- To ensure coherence within PSI structures, the PSI Global Firefighters' Network will operate as an extension of the PSI Global LRG Network, aligning with its [Charter](#), while providing a dedicated platform to address firefighters' specific needs and realities.
- PSI is mapping current and potential firefighter union membership and carrying out regional consultations of their affiliates through the PSI regions to activate the work, inform the global process, identify priorities, and key regional and global issues to target. While limited resources are available for this work in 2026, PSI aims at building progressive capacity.

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