



Staff Union
of the International Labour Organization
Syndicat du personnel
de l'Organisation internationale du Travail
Sindicato del personal
de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo

Speech by the President of the Staff Union

Governing Body

335th Session, March 2019

Madam President, whom I have the pleasure of congratulating on her election,
Honourable delegates,
Mr Director-General,
Dear colleagues,

It is my honour to deliver this address as President elect of the ILO Staff Union, representing almost 70 per cent of the ILO staff at headquarters and in the field.

And here, I must halt a moment to pay tribute to the staff of several other organizations of the United Nations who lost 21 of their colleagues in the tragic air crash that occurred in Ethiopia on 10 March. Whenever a member of our staff disappears, every one of us in the UN family feels a personal sense of loss.

At a time such as this, it might seem futile, even inappropriate, to speak of other matters, but such is the duty that I must nevertheless endeavour to fulfil.

Today, it is both with some humility but also with pride and emotion that I speak to this assembled body as we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the ILO, this institution which, I truly believe, is dear to us all.

The humility I feel in addressing you stems from the thought of all the Governing Body sessions that have been held one after the other since the beginning of the 20th century, where your predecessors, ladies and gentlemen, all those delegates representing workers, employers and governments, have done everything they can, year after year, to establish, refine and strengthen the mandate of this oldest of all United Nations organizations, so that peace, social justice and decent work can at all times be at the centre of the major debates confronting our global society, 100 years after its creation.

At the same time I am proud and deeply moved to be standing here before you as the representative of the ILO's staff, to bid you consider awhile the concerns they are facing, just as all the women and men who have preceded me in this capacity have done for well-nigh 100 years, ever since 1920.

Dialogue, innovation, adaptation, courage and perseverance, these are the principles and values that have always guided, and continue to guide today, all those whose role it has been to further the Organization's objectives. Surely their determination and commitment warrant that we should rise to the occasion and, despite the heavy schedule ahead of us, mark the day by celebrating all that our Organization has achieved over the past century.

The staff at headquarters greatly appreciated the opportunity they were given on 20 January last to take part in the official opening of the centenary celebrations, and today they are already looking forward to the coming event in April when the field staff in particular will be to the fore.

The staff representatives have also been very sensitive to the publication of the report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, whose principal objective has been to provide guidelines for bringing about "a better future for work for all". In the global context in which we find ourselves today, that would be no mean achievement.

The report, which is directed at each and every stakeholder in the world of work, affords an ambitious vision of what that world might one day resemble before the end of the 21st century. The representatives of the ILO's staff have been quick to decipher the key

messages that the report conveys, such as the vital importance of placing the human element at the centre of our concerns, of guaranteeing access to lifelong apprenticeship and of strengthening social protection. They would like to think that the report applies among others to the men and women who are first in line as they work untiringly at headquarters and in the field so that all the Organization's values and principles are handed down intact through the ages. You can imagine how difficult they would find it to understand that the ILO's should fail to live up to the beliefs it proclaims when it comes to its own personnel.

It looks as if we may still have to wait some time for that, though, considering that some of the documents submitted to this session would suggest to the staff representatives that, however ambitious and forward-looking the report on the future of work may be, the hopes it conveys have not yet quite penetrated the minds of those who write and submit them.

I refer specifically to documents GB/335/PFA/6 and /7, which already came up for discussion yesterday but whose recommendations - notably the third recommendation of the first of the two documents - would seem to be inspired more by the ILO's desire to get as much as it can out of its employees by farming out more and more of the work to be done than by any genuine attempt to provide effective social protection for the staff as a whole. The recommendation quite clearly goes against the assertion we find in the report to the effect that "the future of work requires a strong and responsive social protection system based on the principles of solidarity and risk sharing". Just in case the message conveyed in my earlier statements - and in those of my predecessors, too, in fact - has not got through, allow me to repeat it yet again: any attempt to undermine the Staff Health Insurance Fund for reasons other than the interests of its members will be firmly resisted. The ILO is deeply attached to its health system, which is based on the very principles that are propounded in the Global Commission's report.

I refer also to document GB/335/PFA/1 on the programme and budget, where the staff can at last discover the (in their view, greatly exaggerated) amount of money that has been spent on assessing operational procedures that would allow "the elimination of a number of clerical support functions, releasing resources for ... front-line technical work" It is of course

not the decision itself that the staff representatives are challenging, since it stems from a decision-making prerogative that they do not question. What does give cause for alarm, rather, is what the document does not say. It makes no reference, for instance, to the human context in which my colleagues evolve (since from now on we are putting the human element at the heart of the debate) or to the serious impact the decisions taken on may have on their professional life, without for example guaranteeing them access to continuous training so as to have a hope of finding another post. What the document entirely overlooks is the increased workload and added stress for such of our colleagues as survive in the administrative services, where they are so exhausted that, more and more often, resort has to be had to external assistance so that they can meet shorter and shorter deadlines that are virtually impossible to attain without their health suffering. What the document ignores is the fact that no support posts are being created in the field to handle the increased number of technical posts in field offices. Meanwhile, from our staff representatives in the field we hear of colleagues being on the verge of a breakdown, of the regular downward reclassification of posts for purely financial reasons, of the lack of recognition for work done. Yes, indeed, here at the ILO it certainly is time for the human element to be once again placed at the centre of the debate.

The Staff Union deplores the endless platitudes to be found throughout the Governing Body documents, which often give only a distorted view of the real working conditions in our Organization. But it must not be forgotten that, behind the proposals that are ostensibly advanced in the interests of a streamlined budget, there are flesh-and-blood men and women. Charity, they say, begins at home. So yes, let's have a programme that really is focused on the human element; let's take this opportunity to set a good example; let's "seize the moment".

Those were my general remarks. I shall now go into a little more detail about the large number of documents that have been submitted to this session for information or for approval, so that you can understand where the staff representatives are coming from.

The first three documents I shall comment on have to do with the United Nations common system and its hitherto famous – at least in these walls – ICSC. I refer to documents GB/335/PFA/13, GB/335/PFA/INF/4 and GB/335/PFA/INF/5.

The Staff Union confirms the information contained in document PFA/13 regarding the consultative process, working arrangements and reform of the post adjustment methodology. It does, however, regret that such an important process should be moving forward so slowly and that there should be some surprising changes in the timetable that the staff representatives see as mere delaying tactics. On the other hand, it does appreciate what it sees as a gesture of appeasement and goodwill, namely the decision of the ICSC's new president to send a message to the entire United Nations staff assuring them of his intention that, under his presidency, the Commission should in future live up to its mandate and its objectives. At the same time – and aware of the irony of the situation - the Staff Union notes with some satisfaction that the ICSC, in a ... how shall I put it? ... burst of delayed-action conscientiousness, should suddenly have decided to incorporate in its own Statute and Rules of Procedure the decisions that the United Nations General Assembly laid down in report A/53/30 of 1998. Considering that that was a mere 20 years ago, this is a delayed action of historic proportions!

Regarding the report contained in document PFA/INF/4 on the decisions of the United Nations General Assembly, it is again a matter for regret that the Assembly should always be far keener to initiate savings which the staff very often end up paying for than to adopt ICSC recommendations which, for once, had been discussed with the staff federations the way they are supposed to be and had ended in a consensus. Adopting those recommendations could have simultaneously satisfied the administrations' need for a flexible body of staff **and** made working for the United Nations a more attractive proposition by guaranteeing a better work/life balance. I am of course referring here to paragraph 21 of the document.

I would also draw the attention of the ILO's constituents and the members of the ILO Staff Pension Committee to document PFA/INF/5, and specifically to paragraph 14, where it refers to amending the Regulations and Rules of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund (UNJSPF) in a manner that could seriously undermine the ILO's representation on the Joint Board. The members of the Governing Body, the administration and the participants in the Fund will need to be extremely vigilant in ensuring that the Fund is not gradually taken over by other organizations. Here again, what we are talking about is the social protection of the

staff, an area where the ILO has always been looked upon as a leading light in the United Nations common system. We must see that it continues to be so.

I shall now turn to the other PFA documents that have direct implications for the staff's employment and working conditions.

Regarding document GB/335/PFA/3 on the headquarters building renovation project, the Staff Union is concerned about the possible consequences of there being a gap between the two phases of the project, especially with respect to the persistent presence of asbestos in the lower parts of the building, the notorious fire hazards and the poor quality of the air. You may possibly not be aware that of many of our colleagues work day in day out in the lower floors of the building, and the Staff Union cannot see why the occupational safety policy within one and the same Organization should operate at two speeds. Where it is a matter of the staff's safety, the Staff Union believes that the ILO should first and foremost focus on its currently understaffed human resources so that they can do their job properly, with proper contracts, rather than resort unduly to outside enterprises. That said, we realize that nowadays, though a worker's life may be priceless, once he or she is no longer there the cost can be extremely high.

The Staff Union therefore urges the Governing Body to act responsibly when it is taking decisions that have to do with the security, well-being, safety and health of the ILO staff, with due respect for the standards set by its host country and by the United Nations.

As to document 335/PFA/10 on amendments to the Staff Regulations, the Staff Union believes that proper consultations were held between the Union and the administration and that the document adequately reflects the outcome. It is nevertheless following very closely the discussions being held in the ICSC regarding the review of the methodology for calculating the salaries of the categories of staff concerned, particularly in the light of the legal disputes and appeals that have surrounded the issue during these past two years.

The Staff Union was particularly interested in document 335/PFA/11 on the composition and structure of the ILO staff, given the discussions that are to be held with the administration this year on the issue of the Organization's increased diversity. In the Staff

Union's view, if the question of diversity is to be taken seriously, the concepts, problems and central issues involved must be correctly defined from the very start. Diversity among the ILO staff cannot be simply reduced to the number of different passports held by the Organization's employees. Moreover, we cannot allow the search for the best person for each post, which is the prime concern of any recruitment process, to be undermined by measures that go against the fundamental principles of non-discrimination embodied in the United Nations Charter. Diversity is much more than a matter of hard cash that member States are prepared to contribute to the Organization. Quite apart from geographical distribution, it comprises gender inequality, quality in terms of social origin, linguistic equality, equality among the socio-occupational groups, integration of persons in situation of handicap and non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The administration will at the same time need to promote creative initiatives, which means finding additional resources in order to devise better ways of integrating young workers from every part of the globe so that they can join and the Organization and make a useful contribution. The Staff Union has already said that it is ready to engage in any discussion on the subject.

Turning to document GB/335/PFA/12/1 on the proposed amendments to the Statute of the ILO Administrative Tribunal, the Staff Union shares the Tribunal's concern about anything that might seriously compromise its neutrality and its independence. It is absolutely vital for the staff of the ILO, as well as of all the organizations that come under the Tribunal's jurisdiction, that it should render justice in all independence and impartiality.

Finally, the Staff Union would like to say a word about the ILO's duty to honour its mandate in the context of its centenary celebrations. Anyone who has read all the documents before the Governing Body attentively cannot help but observe that our Organization is at a crossroads. Every document, even the ostensibly least contentious, is contingent in some degree on the United Nations reform, the Global Commission's report on the future of work and the expectation that that the ILO should issue a strong statement to mark the Organization's centenary. These are considerations that are far too important for the staff representatives to ignore. The very wording used in document GB/335/PFA/1 – "change of direction", "reorientation", "reorganization" – leaves no doubt in one's mind as to the consequences that the decisions involved may have for the staff. The Staff Union has also

taken due note of paragraphs 42 and 45 of document GB/ 335/INS/10 on the United Nations reform, though it regrets the absence of any clear reference to existing labour relations mechanisms, where all discussions, consultations and negotiations on the possible consequences of the reform for the ILO staff will have to take place:

During the past hundred years, thanks to the resilience of its ILO's tripartite constitution, the Organization has weathered many a storm, and it has always succeeded in find its rightful place in the course of the United Nations' multiple attempts at integration, while retaining its remarkable specificity. And the ILO staff, too, have always known how to adapt to the new configurations, so long as they have not posed a threat to social dialogue conducted in good faith ahead of whatever decisions have had to be taken. They therefore trust that the specific form of labour relations that we have in the ILO, which they see as inherent in the Organization's DNA, will again prevail throughout this period of reorganization, so that it continues to be a shining example within the United Nations system and to be conducive to good practice and its ensuing benefits.

What would otherwise be the point of being the oldest member of the United Nations family if it was not respected for its experience and expertise?

At the risk of repeating myself, allow me to remind you, as Governing Body delegates representing the three groups of workers, governments and employers. that the world parliament of labour that your predecessors created and nurtured for a hundred years, and which you are perpetuating here today, is unique, fully worthy of respect and, especially, indispensable. In the interests of decent work, the maintenance of peace and social justice, It is essential that tripartism endure. You an outstanding example of the benefits of social dialogue within the United Nations which, for all the obstacles and difficulties it entails, carries with it the beauty and satisfaction of engaging in discussions through which it is possible to devise and conclude agreements and to promote a system of labour standards that can benefit workers throughout world. Let this message be heard loud and clear, so that there can be no doubt in people's minds.

For a hundred years, the destinies of the three component parts of this Organization have been irrevocably intertwined. The Organization cannot hope to function if the tripartite stakeholders are unable to find their way to a compromise so as to provide it with the guidance it needs. And the Organization cannot function without a competent and committed Secretariat and personnel to implement the decisions that are taken. The staff will always stand side by side with the administration and the Organization's constituents in promoting social justice and decent work. It trusts that the feeling is reciprocated where the staff's employment and working conditions are concerned.

As members of the staff, we believe that all those who have helped to build the Organization over the years have every reason to be proud of their achievement, and we hope that our journey together will continue for many years to come.

On behalf of the staff, I wish the ILO a happy anniversary and, more than anything, long life in the days ahead!

Thank you for your kind attention.

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