



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

10 April 2017

**Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union Committee to the Programme,
Financial and Administrative Section of the ILO Governing Body**

(329th Session - March 2017)

Chairperson,
Mr Director-General,
Ladies and gentlemen, Members of the Governing Body,
Dear colleagues,

It is my honour to address you today, as the elected Chair of the ILO Staff Union, which represents around 70 per cent of staff, covering all categories.

Those who have already heard me speak in this arena, especially when I have defended the interests and rights of staff or to report a failure to respect the mechanisms for consultation with staff, are familiar with the extent to which my comments can at times be vehement.

But it is also my duty to inform you when things go well. I believe that the perseverance and tenacity with which the Union has hammered home the need for an industrial relations framework in which dialogue and negotiation measure up to its fundamental principles have a hand in that. Undeniably, the firm commitment, reiterated by our Director-General, Mr Guy Ryder, to a robust and sustainable mechanism of information, consultation and negotiation helps greatly to maintain the currently calm social climate. This is, in any case, what all Staff Union representatives (both at headquarters and in the field) perceived during their biannual meeting with him.

At this meeting, none of the concerns raised by the staff were considered taboo. The responses to the questions raised demonstrated the Director-General's commitment either to discuss the issue in more detail or to reaffirm certain fundamental principles. The staff representatives warmly welcomed these reassertions, which are essential for maintaining trust and good faith discussions among the social partners, such as the need to refuse parallel consultation processes and to refer to the negotiated institutional framework based, as far as

possible, on current circumstances. We have therefore obtained the commitment of the Director-General who will, himself, together with his representatives during negotiations, always act in this spirit of collaboration.

Having emphasized this, the Staff Union considers it important to make you aware of certain concerns that I mentioned, in so far as they are linked, directly or indirectly, to the decisions and recommendations taken at the Governing Body.

The first concern relates to workload. As you are aware, over the past five years, staff at headquarters and in the field have witnessed several successive reforms. Although these reforms were deemed necessary, they have had a significant impact on staff, who have paid a heavy price. The time dedicated to these procedures is spent at the expense of the time needed for the performance of duties that serve constituents. The continuation of streamlining, which was started to ensure all duties were completed, significantly increased the stress levels experienced by staff. This situation is particularly striking in certain field offices and, let me repeat, has an impact on the main duties to be performed at the constituents' request. Furthermore, certain flagship programmes or initiatives, which are also essential to the Organization's visibility, have not received the financial or human resources commensurate with the quantity and quality of the work to be provided. The Union confirms that some of our colleagues have been pushed to breaking point because of their workload and notes with growing concern, together with the medical and social welfare services, a rise in stress linked to working in an environment that is not conducive to performing duties in a calm and optimum manner. Urgency becomes the rule and "doing more with less" is a permanent dictate.

This worrying situation is not desirable for the Organization nor the staff. In this regard, the staff representatives are following very closely the discussions taking place in the International Civil Service Commission on the different categories of staff in the field, as they will necessarily have repercussions on the current ILO job classification process. It is imperative that the programmes are thought through in relation to current realities and that priorities are set.

The staff's second concern is safety. While applauding the numerous measures already taken by the Administration to develop the tools and training necessary to guarantee the safety of our colleagues in the field, we must clarify a point with regard to staff working in so-called "fragile" high-risk countries. Since the ILO is not a purely humanitarian organization, when its presence is required, additional measures must be taken to ensure that all staff – irrespective of grade, type of contract or local or international status – have the right, on an equal basis, to be protected or evacuated. This assurance allows staff to carry out their mission without fear and therefore more effectively. Once again, the programmes, priorities and resources afforded must take into account the realities in the field.

The third concern, and not the least, relates to good governance and its corollary, namely the required responsibility of staff in the case of misconduct or negligence. While supporting and recognizing the merits of the concept of "zero tolerance" in the case of

misconduct, the Staff Union has nevertheless requested that the new internal rules, which are applicable to all ILO staff, be implemented as a matter of urgency to prevent any behaviour that conflicts with the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service. This “zero tolerance” policy should be applied transparently and equitably irrespective of the staff member’s grade and proportionate to the misconduct reported. It would be deeply regrettable if la Fontaine’s famous quote, “Depending on whether you are poor or have might, the court will decide you are black or white”, had relevance within our Organization, which must remain a reference in the world of work.

Let us now turn to the documents submitted for your information or approval. As I mentioned at the start of my statement, the documents before you which have a bearing on the employment or working conditions of staff have been subject to information sharing, consultation or negotiation in the appropriate social dialogue structures. We wish to underline this aspect while hoping that these good practices endure as long as our Organization exists. Naturally, the discussions do not mean that we are in agreement but the time and space afforded to dialogue were sufficient to resolve certain differences of opinion to the satisfaction of the parties concerned.

Some of these points have already been discussed prior to my statement but the Union considers it important to share the following issues with you.

Paragraph 15 of document GB.329/PFA/3 on the update on the headquarters building renovation project mentions the commencement of “prospecting for tenants to occupy refurbished space that will become available”. The Staff Union draws the attention of the Governing Body members to the fact that the second phase, currently under way, of moving staff was not carried out as smoothly as the document suggests and that problems with space persist. Decisions taken in this area cannot be based exclusively on commercial considerations and made to the detriment of the working conditions of the staff, who must always produce high-quality work. Such quality requires resources. In other words, we have to be cautious of savings made on the back of staff which could ultimately prove to be very costly.

In addition, paragraph 10 of the document mentions training for maintenance staff but it is also essential for all staff to receive the necessary information and training following the restructuring of their work environment with regard to sanitation, security, health and safety instructions.

The Staff Union was also consulted on document GB.329/PFA/4, which provides an update on after-service health insurance. It has noted the progress made in the discussions of the UN inter-agency Working Group, but wishes to inform the Governing Body that it will continue to follow very closely the Group’s work to ensure that the acquired rights of staff are protected once their service has ended, and that they are not left stateless and without social protection, after spending their entire career in the United Nations common system.

The document also provides an update on the current ILO Staff Health Insurance Fund (SHIF). The staff representatives welcome the efforts made by the Administration in the past year to improve the services provided to participants, and note with satisfaction the reduction, in almost all cases, of the time taken to reimburse expenses. They also warmly welcome the measures taken to strengthen prevention, which were initially requested some time ago by the participants' representatives on the SHIF Management Committee. They are furthermore very encouraged by the other working group created for the governance of the SHIF, which the document does not mention, but which is just as important as the Working Group on Cost-Containment. However, they are very concerned by the Director-General's initiative to use the "services of external experts", alongside the recommendations of an internal working group. Having met the people concerned, the Staff Union fears serious conflicts of interest and a blatant disregard for the terms of reference of this engagement, which aims to maintain the core features of SHIF coverage, namely, its universal nature, the freedom to choose a health provider, and a reasoned balance between contributions and benefits.

You cannot imagine how attached the staff are to the SHIF, even if it sometimes creates difficulties for them. Moreover, given the growing number of negative experiences in other agencies within the United Nations system relating to this issue, it is clear that staff are prepared to defend the current status of the SHIF, if necessary, against the major companies that are circling around it like hungry sharks.

Document GB.329/PFA/10 focuses on amendments to the Staff Regulations, which have serious repercussions on employment conditions. I can confirm that this document has also been the subject of many long discussions between the Administration and staff representatives.

The first part amends the education grant scheme for international staff, pursuant to the decisions made by the United Nations General Assembly on the compensation package. I will not refer again to the differences in viewpoints between the United Nations administration and its staff, including specialized agencies. However, the staff have launched a number of legal proceedings, the outcome of which will be made known to everyone.

With specific regard to these changes to the scale for the reimbursement of education expenses, and the subsequent savings, the Staff Union explicitly requested that such resources be injected back into activities reserved exclusively for these staff members, and not be allocated again to activities that prevent staff from working properly, particularly in the field.

The second part of the document concerns the implementation of another General Assembly decision that raises the retirement age to 65 years for all staff, while preserving the rights acquired by staff from the time of their entry into service. Numerous long and lively discussions have been held between the Administration and the Staff Union to strike a balance between the wishes of both parties, that is to say: promote the employment of young people, while ensuring the possibility to retain essential know-how and skills within the Organization; improve workforce planning; prevent the inappropriate hiring of retired staff at the expense of

young talent; and ensure that the rules are applied fairly and that certain humanitarian situations are taken into account. This balancing act has come to an end, and the staff representatives are reasonably satisfied.

Lastly, I will turn to document GB.329/PFA/11/1, which provides an update on discussions with the European Patent Organisation (EPO) on possible future action to improve the Tribunal's caseload. I have a duty to draw the Governing Body's attention to the fact that, despite the information contained in this document on improving dialogue within the ILO, the Staff Union has received several rather alarming communications from some staff representatives, which imply that there is a poisonous climate in the Organization. As the staff representatives of the EPO do not have access to this forum, they have asked me to advocate on their behalf to ensure that any decisions made by the Tribunal do not result in the denial of their jurisdictional rights, given that the Tribunal is the only recourse available to them. Furthermore, the situation faced for many years now by our colleagues at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is unacceptable in a system such as that of the United Nations.

In relation to this last issue, I would like to conclude by reiterating my introductory remarks and underscoring the extent to which a climate conducive to social dialogue brings added value to organizations such as ours. Staff members who are left out of decision-making, and whose views on employment and working conditions go unheard, will rarely give the best of themselves, and the institution will bear the consequences, which can only be negative.

Fortunately, this is not currently the case for the ILO, and we can be proud of our Organization, which upholds at least part of its mandate by creating the conditions necessary for an internal social dialogue that is admittedly lively, but healthy.

Thank you for your attention.
