



**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

6 December 2017

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

(331st Session – 31 October 2017)

Mr 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 Chairperson of the ILO Staff Union, which represents around 70 per cent of the staff. This is a great opportunity for me to talk to you about industrial relations within the Office, the morale of the staff and their position on the items on the Governing Body's agenda.

Of particular interest to the staff are two documents on, respectively, the Human Resources Strategy for the next five years (document GB.331/PFA/13) and the decisions taken by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) regarding the post adjustment for Geneva (document GB.331/PFA/16(Rev.)).

The first of these documents is subtitled "Agility, engagement and efficiency". Naturally, these words drew the attention of the staff representatives, who were very interested in the long-term strategy prepared by the Human Resources Development Department (HRD) since, as we all know, an organization's value is often measured not only by the competence and motivation of its staff, but also by their well-being, all of which are needed to help them to achieve their goals. The staff representatives therefore took due note of the document and would like to take this opportunity to share with you their position on several of the issues mentioned therein that have a direct impact on staff working conditions.

While the Staff Union is pleased to note that the Office wants "to be able to attract, develop, engage" and, above all, "retain" staff, it really hopes that these good intentions are not merely a strategy on paper and that they are followed by specific action in favour of staff. It also hopes that "agility", a current buzzword, does not threaten job security. The Union will therefore make every effort to ensure, on the one hand, that staff retain their acquired rights with regard to contracts without limit of time

and, on the other, that colleagues working on development cooperation projects are no longer considered expendable depending on the needs of the Organization. These colleagues, who now account for 40 per cent of the ILO's workforce, are entitled not only to contracts of the same duration as the projects for which they were hired, but also to prospects for genuine career advancement and incorporation into the Organization, since they helped it to achieve its goals. This issue has, of course, been discussed during the negotiations on a new contracts policy, which are still under way.

With regard to staff recruitment and selection, the Staff Union would like to make two remarks:

- First, while it agrees that the Organization needs to diversify its workforce, it hopes that this initiative will not be limited to geographical or gender diversity. The term “diversity” has a far broader meaning and should also include ways to better integrate persons with physical or mental disabilities. Above all, the Staff Union hopes that this issue will be incorporated into the rules set out in the Staff Regulations rather than including them in the internal ad hoc practices, which give rise to numerous equity and justice problems and are a factor in the upsurge in legal complaints, which are never in the Organization's interests. If the rules must be changed, the Union is prepared to resume its place at the bargaining table, at which time it will reaffirm that it is essential for the Organization to introduce a comprehensive programme to identify, recruit, integrate and support young people from all countries – including under-represented or unrepresented countries – so that they can plan their long-term career with the Organization calmly and, above all, legitimately.
- Our second comment concerns the targets listed in paragraph 19 of the document. The Union notes that, as a result of the intervention of the private corporation charged with conducting the Business Process Review (commonly referred to as the BPR), everything must now be quantified. As an attentive, involved witness to the recruitment and selection procedures, the Union wonders where the data presented was gathered. The human and financial resources allocated to the ILO recruitment service are so minimal and so piecemeal that, in all probability, these targets cannot be met without a relentless work overload for the staff. The point is not to streamline at all costs but, in an Organization that should serve as a model, to make it possible to recruit or select the best person in every service or office set up worldwide, and that process cannot be reduced to the bare bones. “Quick and dirty” is unacceptable if we want the quality needed in the recruitment and selection of our staff.

The document also makes several references to staff members' need for a healthy environment and good working conditions. All of the colleagues whom I represent doubtless have a wealth of individual and collective experience to share with regard to their daily lives in the Organization, where the pressure continues to grow, where they are required to record the progress of their work to the nearest half-hour and where General Service staff are doing four or five jobs at the same time, particularly in the field; some of them are performing tasks far above their grade level and having to run whole offices in the absence of the director and the experts, who are overwhelmed by the burden of missions in neighbouring countries. This situation has a significant impact on the Organization's ability to act and on its independence in meeting constituent needs. I also feel compelled to mention the working conditions of our colleagues on development cooperation projects; for reasons of economy, some of them are sent to so-called “fragile” States that may lack the minimum safety standards, while others are working on month-to-month contracts with no idea of what their career prospects may be. Doing more with less; abolishing posts when the incumbent retires; using subcontractors in areas that are already stripped to the bone, such as security; spreading uncertainty and frustration – it all has a cost in terms of health and staff morale and, as a result, the incidence of work-related illness is rising continually. Is this what the

Organization wants for its staff as it prepares to celebrate its centenary? Is the future of work less important in the ILO itself than it is elsewhere? The Organization should be wary of false economies.

The Staff Union would also like to raise the issue of internal governance. While the administration seems to be satisfied with ILO governance, the staff representatives believe it is premature to say – as indicated in paragraph 12 of document GB.331/PFA/13 – that “significant investments have been made in advancing internal governance and accountability”. Much remains to be done with respect to transparency and accountability in cases of misconduct in order to increase staff trust in the administration’s decisions in this area. While the concept of zero tolerance is much talked about within these walls, it cannot reasonably be based on a piecemeal and simplistic approach, lacking the clear vision of a comprehensive accountability framework. The Staff Union would like the Organization, in the interests of the ILO and its staff, to have a comprehensive and coherent system with guidelines and procedures in place, to ensure that the persons concerned will be treated fairly, irrespective of their place in the hierarchy, and that their rights will be respected, in line with the ILO accountability framework adopted in 2010 and in keeping with the other organizations in the United Nations system.

Of course, I cannot end my comments on the Human Resources Strategy without discussing one issue that the staff representatives consider to be fundamental: where is social dialogue in all of this? You have to wait for the penultimate page of the document, which focuses primarily on staff matters, to find any reference to the Staff Union (“the staff representatives”) and that it has been placed under the category of “synergies and cross-cutting issues”.

Finally, some good news: instead of not being included at all, the Staff Union will be involved in everything!

At any rate, this is how the staff representatives interpret it. They will be ready to take part in all future discussions, consultations and negotiations that will be held in the formal setting of the Joint Negotiating Committee on all the topics covered in the five-year strategy. This will ensure that the promises made in paragraph 27 of the document are kept, which refers to “a conducive work environment and smooth industrial relations”.

Last but not least, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Governing Body, let me now turn to the final document, GB.331/PFA/16(Rev.). I am sure you will all have something to say about this. You all know that one of the special characteristics of the international civil service is the two-tier system for determining its conditions of service and working conditions. Some aspects may be determined within each organization through a kind of bargaining framework; but when it comes to determining salaries and allowances, the ICSC is recognized as the competent body, under the delegated authority of each organization. This is what we know as the “United Nations common system”.

I am not going to go back over all of the events that have taken place because the six-month fight – including mass demonstrations and work stoppages, supported by global petitions and acts of solidarity by some of the most remote duty stations in the field – cannot be summarized in just a few minutes. However, I can tell you what, in the light of new developments, staff are still unwilling to accept. Make no mistake about the purpose of this action. This is not an isolated fight of affluent civil servants at a headquarters location determined to maintain their salary at any cost. ILO staff are responsible and devoted, and prepared to accept decisions concerning their conditions of service, as long as those decisions are substantiated, justified and fair. This fight is about probity; it is about the seriousness and reliability of analyses. It is a fight that they believe to be justified, a fight for their salaries to be

determined according to surveys applying measurable, transparent criteria to the situation of the countries where they are based; surveys that do not contain over 50 officially acknowledged mistakes, as was the case, for instance, with the 2016 survey for Geneva salaries. It is a global fight for all United Nations staff – whether based in Nairobi, Jakarta, Haiti, Addis Ababa or Bangkok – who, in respect of staff surveys, have suffered for years from a lack of transparency and technical clarity and, ultimately, from a lack of accountability and admissibility on the part of the body conducting the surveys.

The July 2017 session of the ICSC was a case in point. The session was intended to clarify a number of issues and to put minds at rest, in the hope of steering the figures back in the right direction and allowing the staff representatives to leave in the knowledge that, by entrusting the ICSC with determining their salaries, they were relying on the pillars of good faith, reliability and competence.

Having been there in person, I can tell you that this was far from true. It was even agonizing in many respects. In addition to some very far-fetched data being used to justify a sudden salary cut of close to 8 per cent – while all national indicators show otherwise – staff representatives witnessed with dismay how overt contempt and arrogance were directed at some of the highest bodies representing the United Nations and at major global trade union federations which, alarmed by the seriousness of the situation, had offered to have a dialogue, but whose letters had not even been read. They were appalled at the content and form of the discussions, and at the weakness of the technical arguments. Not once was the methodology questioned by the entity using it. The staff's distrust of and anger at the ICSC further increased when their representatives learned that the recommendations adopted at the session, and which could have led to positive action in favour of the staff, were not based on any sound technical arguments. Thus, the unilateral decision to reintroduce a temporary cushion in the form of a margin at an arbitrary rate appears to be a short-term token gesture intended to appease staff. In any event, it would not solve the underlying problem: the methodology and how long-term calculations are made. In its July decision, the ICSC undertakes to review the methodology and to hold discussions with all the parties concerned. This is a wise decision. Furthermore, we have just learned that other organizations in the United Nations system recently decided to stay their hand pending receipt of up-to-date information to enable them to make an informed decision. ILO staff are therefore counting on the members of the Governing Body to follow suit, as they consider it to be premature, not to say risky, to do otherwise at the current time. Time must be set aside for discussions on reviewing the methodology – and staff representatives should be involved in those discussions. The salaries of staff based in Geneva and, indirectly, in the other headquarters locations and in all other duty stations can only be fairly determined on the basis of reliable facts.

As the staff representative, it is my duty to inform all of you, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Governing Body, that trust would otherwise be destroyed forever, and ILO staff would be more determined than ever to contest, by any means necessary – including before the various relevant tribunals – any decision that is technically unfounded. Indeed, our colleagues at the United Nations secretariat and other organizations have already started down that path, with over 250 legal appeals having been lodged with the Registry of the United Nations Dispute Tribunal to date and more expected.

As I said earlier, we must be wary of false economies. It is therefore important to think in the long term and to assess any potential losses.

This regrettable episode has, in any case, highlighted one fact: there is no collective bargaining mechanism in place for the United Nations system. Currently, the salaries of 60,000 international civil servants are determined using methodologies that are certainly very complex, but above all incredibly

opaque – whose arcane calculations are jealously guarded by the heads of the duty stations – and are non-negotiable. The events of the first half of 2017 have only served to confirm the belief of all United Nations staff members (both at headquarters locations and in the field) that, against the backdrop of upcoming reforms, the United Nations can no longer harbour this Commission in its current form. It employs seventeenth-century methods, and with each passing day becomes less trustworthy and credible, posing a growing problem for both the staff and the organizations. ICSC working methods must therefore be overhauled as a matter of urgency and a dependable formal framework for labour relations established within the United Nations system. The reputation of the United Nations is at stake and the ILO will doubtless have a role to play in the reform process.

Thank you.

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