



22 November 2023

**Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union
349th Session of the Governing Body
(31 October 2023)**

Chairperson,
Director-General,
Members of the Governing Body,
Dear colleagues,
and all of you here today, in the room or online,

I address you for the second time as Chairperson of the Staff Union Committee of this Organization, which brings you together again, today, within these walls – walls that you may note are gradually revealing their new lease of life. I wish to thank the staff members who work to provide us all – whether we are employees of the Organization, decision-makers like you, or visitors to conferences or workshops – with the best material conditions for productive and efficient, yet pleasant work. They work long hours to ensure that we all have the necessary comfortable working conditions.

Indeed, we are **privileged**. It is a very real sentiment among the colleagues that I represent. Privileged in terms of our working environment in Geneva, and also in many duty stations; privileged as we have a work contract, a substantial salary and associated rights; privileged above all in the meaning of what we do. Indeed, it seems to be a “luxury”, today, to be able to work to defend, construct and promote the values of social justice, equality, non-discrimination, freedom of association, and respect for human dignity at work. We are proud to do so and it is what allows us to keep going.

This awareness of our privilege is what actually stops us, most often, from complaining about things that are not right. Because, of course, the life of an international civil servant **is not all rosy**: colleagues in different duty stations see their purchasing power eroded by inflation, the devaluation of their national currency and the increase in the cost of living. Meanwhile, the new methodology adopted by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) has not yet been proven, potentially will not be able to cope with the fluctuations, and is mired in an

administrative inertia that thwarts the required responsiveness. We also wonder about the potentially unfavourable consequences of the ongoing revision of the remuneration system of the United Nations common system.

It is also hard to continue working when the standard contract for the majority of colleagues is for a period of one, or at most, two years, renewable for one to three months, which makes it difficult to plan life in the medium term. Difficult moreover when the prospects for career development and recognition of performance are ever slimmer. Even more difficult when many colleagues find themselves in situations of war, conflict and violation of human rights; we are, in these situations, “privileged” to have an Organization that takes care of national and international colleagues alike, which is not the case for other sister agencies of the United Nations. On the agenda you have a number of items relating to the Organization’s response to dramatic situations where our colleagues are present and continue tirelessly to defend our values of human dignity: Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Myanmar, Afghanistan, the Sudan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Jerusalem. The messages of solidarity that the Union had to send this year were too numerous. Who would have thought that I would wish for the Union to have had less frequent need to call for solidarity. But our leitmotif is well established: “we do not complain, we are far luckier than most of the population”. And so we continue, with self-sacrifice and passion, to serve this cherished mandate.

The year that has just passed has been, rightly, a **search for the meaning** to give to this mandate which evolves according to the guidance that you, our constituents, provide, within the approved programme and budget framework. In June, the staff followed the budgetary approval process with a mixture of faith and apprehension. This search for meaning is reflected in interpersonal relations, between staff and management, and also in how we work. Many **structural changes** are in fact under way within the Organization to adjust, transform, streamline and maximize the way we work. If the desire of the Director-General on his arrival was, indeed, not to engage in major restructuring, the fact remains that change is the order of the day for many departments, units and projects at headquarters and in the field, and that many colleagues are still struggling to find meaning and their place in this process.

We also had to reinvent ourselves to implement the **new ILO policy on flexible working arrangements**. We are proud of this: the policy is a common commitment by the senior management and staff that affirms that trust must be at the heart of working relations, and that it is essential to find a balance between aspirations, individual interests and team and collective dynamics. This policy is, finally, a reaffirmation that our workplaces are evolving and that our working methods must also evolve, all while preserving what is essential, of course.

It is our wish, at long last, to make progress on **negotiations** that have long been blocked and have forced us, together with the senior management, to approach certain negotiations in a new way, putting aside positions that seem to be irreconcilable in order to identify, first and foremost, our common interests, and to move forward constructively based on those shared interests. It is interesting to note that this desire to make progress has led us, with the senior management, to take the time to return to the very foundations of the collective bargaining

process, that is, to ensure that the principles of good faith, the mandate and the delegation of authority are shared by all parties to negotiation and that the necessary mechanisms are also in place to resolve differences that could arise; and to be able to call on the necessary and relevant means of expressing a difference of opinion or opposition. It is important that the requisite processes are in place and are understood and observed by all in order to enter into negotiations. It also seems to me to be a happy coincidence that the item on collective bargaining is on the agenda of this session of the Governing Body.

Thus, we have been able to make progress this year on the **revision of contractual conditions** and to reach an agreement on a list of measures to be implemented and which would provide for equal treatment of all colleagues, whether their positions are financed from voluntary contributions – which is the case for the vast majority of our staff today – or from assessed contributions. It is unacceptable that most of the staff are in precarious employment positions. But of course, the refrain remains the same “we do not complain, we are privileged.” It is all a question of where we place the benchmark.

So, what do we want to compare ourselves to? and, what must we aspire to? For the ILO Staff Union, it is clear that we must only aspire to the best when it comes to working conditions and social dialogue, and it is our duty, along with the senior management, to set an example. It would be unacceptable if, once again, “the shoemaker wears the worst shoes”. We must have the resources to achieve our ambitions, while remaining realistic about what is possible. The work ahead to make our commitments a reality is certainly daunting, but the Union has confidence in the will of the Director-General and his administration to ensure that dialogue will be able to continue and, if necessary, that they will venture towards creative proposals to guarantee that the staff that serve you will enjoy decent working conditions which are sustainable in the long term, and, why not, which allow us to dream of exemplary working conditions and of becoming the model to follow for the whole United Nations common system.

It is this **exemplary nature** that I would like to talk about as I refer to certain items from the Governing Body’s agenda. Soon, you are going to consider document GB.349/PFA/8, which proposes an amendment to Chapter XII of the Staff Regulations on discipline, and then document GB.349/PFA/10 on the jurisdiction – among other things – of the Administrative Tribunal across the common system. These documents talk about discipline and justice.

As international civil servants, we should behave in a truly exemplary manner. In the introduction to the Standards of Conduct of the International Civil Service it is written that “it is therefore incumbent on international civil servants to adhere to the highest standards of conduct; for, ultimately, it is the international civil service that will enable the United Nations system to bring about a just and peaceful world.” Therefore, it goes without saying that our workplaces should be exemplary in terms of mutual respect, should be free from all forms of violence and harassment, and should ensure the independence of international civil servants as they carry out their duties. It is important to be able to put the necessary instruments in place to respond to any unacceptable situations, but even more so, to work to ensure that they do not arise in the first place: it is too late for the individual and for the institution when the

damage has already been done. The efforts of the Human Resources Development Department described in document GB.349/INS/6(Rev.1) “Review of the implementation of the strategy to give effect to the resolution concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work” should be intensified. Yesterday, you considered document GB.349/PFA/6 on the reports of the Joint Inspection Unit on matters relating to all entities of the United Nations system. Many of the areas that are the subject of recommendations or that will be reviewed next year are linked directly or indirectly to this issue, and should take into account the importance of better prevention, and above all, managerial responsibility. In any case, we hope that next year we will be able to negotiate new measures to prevent and to deal with violence at work, because we are honestly witnessing too many situations in which our colleagues are suffering.

This is a priority to which we should dedicate ourselves and the time it needs. It is therefore welcome that the review of jurisdictional questions relating to the United Nations common system, contained in document GB.349/PFA/10, recommends that no follow-up action should be taken. In fact, it is time to leave behind us this debate on modifying the jurisdictional structure of the United Nations system and to stop calling into question the jurisdiction of the ILO Tribunal. The Staff Union has clearly stated its opposition to any change in jurisdiction, a position that is actually shared by a number of stakeholders, as it would make justice for ILO staff members very distant and separate.

The amendments you have before you to the Staff Regulations concerning disciplinary measures promote a culture of progressiveness and correction. We want to recognize that we have the **right to make a mistake**, and that the Organization should allow us to acknowledge a mistake – when it is acceptable to do so – and to learn from that mistake. It has become increasingly easier to accuse another person or even the system – yes, IRIS is often an easy target – and to make excuses, rather than taking full or partial responsibility for a mistake. Behaving in an exemplary manner of course also means recognizing that we are not perfect but that we do act in good faith. This review also implies a managerial ability to listen to colleagues and to understand why a mistake was made, and to consider an appropriate response that is proportional to whatever the mistake was. We are in a context where we are constantly required to do more, to meet greater demands and more priorities, where fear has become a driving force: fear of not being able to compete with the other organizations that are talking about decent work, fear of not mobilizing sufficient resources, fear of seeing artificial intelligence replace us. We have reached a situation where supervisory and reporting mechanisms are becoming so invasive that the time we have to do “our work” is increasingly rare and precious. It is becoming difficult to recognize and to admit that, in the end, we are “only” human, motivated by our desire to meet the needs of the Organization.

But of course, “we do not complain, we are privileged”.

Yes. We are, in many ways.

I am privileged to have been able to speak to all of you today – and I must say ... you remain impressive, but I also trust in your kindness.

I am also privileged that all my colleagues have placed their trust in me to raise their voices, and I am proud of that.

But above all, and finally, when you, representatives of the world of work, make decisions, and we, civil servants, implement them, we must not forget the privilege – and the responsibility – that we have, remaining faithful to our Constitution, to promote social justice, which is vital to achieving sustainable and universal peace.

Thank you for your attention.

Séverine Deboos
Chairperson, Staff Union Committee
