



19 April 2024

**Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union
350th Session of the Governing Body
(5 March 2024)**

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

Good things come in threes, as they say, so here I am addressing you once again, still with the sense of apprehension that comes from knowing that I speak on behalf of all my colleagues, who – recognizing the need for an organization that represents them – are increasingly placing their trust in the Staff Union, which now has more than 2,100 members. As you will know, no doubt better than me, as leaders of the representative organizations of the world of work, membership numbers may indicate either that our members are preparing a necessary defence of their rights, or recognition of the fact that we have met their expectations, by the progress made.

This ambiguity is very real for us today as we continue to carry out our work to promote social justice, and this is true in many respects. Indeed, how can we remain faithful to our commitment to neutrality and our duty of confidentiality when faced with such devastation on the international stage, especially when the status of United Nations civil servants provides no protection against the bombs that have recently killed more than 150 of our colleagues in the line of duty? How can we find the inner strength to stay resilient and carry on working for years when a military regime ignores the pleas of the Organization we serve, and ultimately continues to violate the human rights we defend? How can we stay true to our deep belief in the power of social justice when conflicts continue to erupt or drag on in many countries, leading us to question whether, after all, we have learned nothing, at least in these 100 years since the creation of the ILO? Next week you will examine, in the Institutional Section, a number of reports following up on the situation in various countries that testify to the disarray in which we can find ourselves, even where support measures are put in place for staff members in the country, such as those mentioned in document GB.350/INS/13, for example, concerning the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine from the perspective of the mandate of the

International Labour Organization. It seems all the more important to be able to rely on the fact that, to use the words of our Director-General in his preface to the report on ILO programme implementation 2022–23, document GB.350/PFA/1(Rev.1): “As we move forward, the ILO will need to strengthen action to place its overarching objective of social justice at the centre of all national and international policies” and “the clear and urgent need for greater social justice can only be addressed through stronger global solidarity, increased policy coherence and improved cooperation and partnerships with other institutions and actors”.

Coherence is certainly very difficult to achieve in an organizational context that appears both divided and vague. Divided, as the number of rules imposed on us appear increasingly numerous and dichotomous: management rules – human and financial – that differ according to the funding sources for our activities, while we are called upon ever more frequently to pool our resources for greater impact. Vague, on the other hand, as reporting lines remain undefined for many departments or units undergoing restructuring at various levels, or due to the fact that recruitments do not systematically follow the same processes an equivalent grade. In addition, the ongoing skills mapping exercise, referred to in several documents on the agenda (the internal audit report and the report on the implementation of the Human Resources Strategy), raises a number of questions from colleagues, who recognize its potential utility but wish to know what consequences it might have for their jobs.

With increased complexity comes the tendency to bolster controls, and to multiply rules and regulations, a process which eventually leads to a withdrawal and a rigidity that leaves no room for imperfection or the improvisation that often generates innovation, ultimately the human element. You may have noticed it in this building: colleagues’ doors are often closed – frequently not because they are working elsewhere, but because colleagues lock themselves away to work on deadlines and to join in video calls around the world, finding less and less time for social interaction in the workplace. We are also losing touch with what “respect in the workplace” means: it is therefore not by chance that the results are mixed, as indicated in the ILO Progress report on the implementation of the Human Resources Strategy 2022–25, under the outcome “respectful and empowering environment”. This is particularly so with regard to the “responsibility of managers to promote a safe working environment, a healthy work–life balance and personal well-being” and comes at a time when every worker should be able to enjoy his or her fundamental right to a safe and healthy workplace. The number of cases involving allegations of harassment or misconduct referred to the Chief Internal Auditor or dealt with by the Human Resources Development Department is all the more worrying, both because of the number of cases that were ultimately unsubstantiated, and which therefore raise questions about a culture that perhaps leads too quickly to complaints, and because of the still-too-high number of ultimately substantiated harassment allegations. The Staff Union deplures, just as much as the Administration, the number of situations leading to complaints of professional misconduct and harassment, including between colleagues.

This situation is increasingly leading us to appreciate the adoption of the three-year ILO action plan on mental health and well-being at work, as mentioned in the same document. The Staff Union was pleased to contribute to the development of this plan and called strongly for the

implementation of one of the first measures, risk assessment. First and foremost, we need to be able to take stock of the situation and analyse the causes that lead many colleagues to no longer be able to cope and to distance themselves from a professional environment that could, on the contrary, give them a sense of fulfilment and direction. The causes of such situations are certainly many and complex, and it is up to the Organization, as the employer, to analyse and remedy them when they are work-related.

To implement this plan, and to enable the Organization to meet the management needs of this most valuable resource in advancing social justice, in other words people, it is regrettable that we have to be ever more thrifty, economical and compromising, at the risk of losing effectiveness and ambition. In the coming months, we will have to prepare proposals for the next programme and budget, and it is already clear that we will have to make difficult choices in prioritizing actions to be taken, while working to meet all the needs you have expressed and our desire to go ever further in promoting social justice. We are currently experiencing a lack of resources for a number of key functions, such as human resources management, conflict prevention and management, and to provide the necessary support to colleagues. The risk is that we end up wanting to “do it all”, but without having the means to do so.

Lastly, in light of the human resources strategy and of document INS/4, “Mid-term report on the implementation of the ILO Action Plan for Gender Equality 2022–25”, I would like to address the current situation of diversity, especially gender equality, within the Office. The document states: “[t]he ILO is moving closer to achieving gender parity regarding the percentage of women occupying positions at the P5 level and above, which increased from 34 per cent in 2009 to around 43 per cent in 2023, surpassing the target of 40 per cent”. This statement, repeated in several other documents, does indeed appear encouraging. The two reports go on to make identical recommendations, calling, rightly, for efforts to be maintained and “to ensure that the progress made towards achieving a gender balance at all levels is maintained”.

However, this success in achieving parity in the upper echelons has been achieved at the expense of career advancement within the ILO and of recognition of skills among the colleagues I represent, who often see even fewer prospects for advancement or who question why only one in three appointments leads to career advancement and whether they lack the skills and the merit to be recognized by their employer.

Similarly, the disparity between job categories is still considerable: it was telling that, on Women’s Day last year, one of our colleagues working in logistics lamented the fact that he had no female colleagues in his team.

Finally, on this subject, it is regrettable that the ILO baulks at introspection regarding the celebration of gender equality. The Administration has not invited the Staff Union to celebrate Women’s Day on 8 March 2024 – this week.

So, yes, we do need solidarity and humanity.

Members of the Governing Body, this solidarity drives our work with the Administration as we seek to address the growing inequalities between staff members through a programme of reforms to harmonize working conditions and ensure greater mobility. To this end, we have submitted to you document PFA/9, “Amendments to the Staff Regulations”. The amendments proposed in the document are a set of measures which should keep us busy throughout 2024 and are the fruit of intense negotiations that have occupied us since December last year. These negotiations are constructive and seek to eliminate any obstacles to mutual understanding of the needs of each party because, ultimately, our shared interest is clearly to ensure that every ILO colleague enjoys the same recognition and working conditions, regardless of how their work is funded. It is equally clear to all parties that ILO staff members wish to advance their careers and enjoy opportunities for geographical and functional mobility.

Those measures should make it possible to recognize that service to the ILO is equally valuable regardless of whether a person works in a development cooperation project or pays compulsory contributions to the Organization’s budget. They should also make it possible to reduce the precariousness of employment for colleagues employed in projects, whose medium- or long-term employment prospects are reduced since they are limited by the lifespan of the specific project. We hope to submit to you in November further measures that should have been negotiated in the interim.

Ultimately, this progress will enable the ILO to align its human resources management with the change in its operations during its second century of existence. Today, the mandate of the ILO is fulfilled as much by its global development cooperation activities as by its normative agenda; both aspects of its work are profoundly intertwined. The future will no doubt require still greater efforts to integrate the human resources framework on a par with efforts at the programme level. The Staff Union will certainly have to fight more battles.

But first things first.

I would like to thank the Director-General for his support. Special thanks are due to my colleagues in the Human Resources Development Department and to the elected representatives of the Staff Union, who devote their time and passion to finding solutions and bringing the very principles of social dialogue and collective bargaining to life within the Organization.

Members of the Governing Body, you may be proud of them, and I hope that it will only deepen your trust in us.

Thank you for your attention and enjoy your lunch.

Séverine Deboos
Chairperson, Staff Union Committee
