



19 June 2025

**Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union Committee
354th Session of the Governing Body (14 June 2025)**

Chairperson,
Worker Vice-Chairperson,
Employer Vice-Chairperson,
Director-General,
Mr Guy Ryder,
Members of the Governing Body,

Dear colleagues, and all of you here today, in this room or online,

First of all, I would like to thank you for giving me the floor in this Governing Body. I know your time is precious, and that you have a full agenda for today's Governing Body, following a Conference that has come to an end after long days and nights of toil. We are certainly all tired today and anxious to get back to our families and loved ones, and I look forward to being reunited with the colleagues with whom we share our daily professional lives. We have experienced some unique, seemingly infinite moments together, but which have enabled us to make headway together in key areas for the world of work.

I would like to thank you on behalf of myself and the 3,800 colleagues I represent. The fact that many of them are here today, in this room or online, is testimony to their desire to be heard and that the reality for staff must be taken into account in your forthcoming discussion on document GB.354/INS/5, entitled "The ILO in a changing multilateral environment: Towards greater effectiveness and efficiency".

As we know, the Staff Union is not normally expected to make a statement at June Governing Body sessions. Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional measures. Together, we must face up to a worrying reality. When I last spoke to you in March this year, I shared with you the importance of trust, which is necessary if we are to be effective architects of social justice, each in our respective roles and with our respective responsibilities. This trust is not insignificant: it is rooted in respect for universal human rights, respect for international labour standards, and respect for social dialogue. This trust should enable us to work together to reinvent the best way of promoting social justice, to ensure that the ILO can meet the legitimate expectations of the world of work and that people remain at the heart of our actions and commitments.

This reinvention cannot be achieved through hasty, unilateral measures and against the very staff who will be implementing these decisions. It requires time and trust.

Members of the Governing Body, this trust has been sorely tested in the current context of insecurity, with many of our reference points upended and a pace of change in the world that is accelerating, at times overwhelming us.

Unfortunately, this trust now seems to be giving way to anxiety and the need to make hasty decisions to deal with the urgency of decisions over which we have no control.

Since March, we have had to put in place emergency measures to support our colleagues whose projects have been pulled overnight. So far 150 colleagues have been made redundant, from Mexico to Fiji, including Viet Nam, Myanmar, Kenya, Brazil, Ghana, Costa Rica, Nigeria, Indonesia, Haiti, United Republic of Tanzania, Lebanon, Thailand, Egypt, China, Peru, Türkiye, Nepal, Armenia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Mauritania, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chile, Pakistan, Lesotho, Côte d'Ivoire, Geneva and Malaysia. Out of the blue, 8 per cent of all staff learned that the projects they were working on were ending. These projects were working towards the promotion of fundamental rights at work, the elimination of child labour, putting an end to human trafficking; they were providing technical support to strengthen freedom of association, and to promote the ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions. These colleagues are left without jobs, without a social safety net – given there is no unemployment insurance scheme or automatic coverage by other social security systems – and in some cases without residence permits in the places to where they have had to move. These are colleagues who have no idea what will become of their lives, who are fearful of the limited prospects of finding a job in a development labour market that is collapsing with a radical review across the United Nations system. These are colleagues for whom the redundancy terms and conditions and other legal issues remain unresolved, even after their departure.

These redundancies also mean that many of the commitments and objectives agreed with our constituents can no longer be fulfilled, given it is impossible to meet the demand for expertise when the experts are no longer there. So, there you have it – we have “done our best”, both the Administration – and I would like to thank the many managers and colleagues who have rallied in the human resources and finance departments – and the Staff Union, through its representatives, who have demonstrated the importance of solidarity and benevolence. But this is far from enough.

We were also saddened and shocked by the news from other agencies in the United Nations system of mass dismissals, with no safety net for staff and no real consultation with staff representative bodies. We are losing colleagues and in some instances friends with whom we have worked for a long time. Let us be clear: the absence of rights at work and genuine social dialogue in these agencies is also our collective failure.

Since March, we have also had to embark on a review process, as outlined in the famous document under discussion today, entitled “The ILO in a changing multilateral environment: Towards greater effectiveness and efficiency”.

Members of the Governing Body, let me get straight to the point: this document, and the proposed measures it contains, is not the result of consultations or of a process of social dialogue with the Staff Union. It is true that from the outset of the proposal preparation process, the Director-General stated his willingness to hold consultations with staff and to consult – or negotiate – with the Staff Union when necessary. The Staff Union was consulted on the immediate cost-saving measures announced to staff on 16 May. The Staff Union passed on a number of questions about the implementation of certain measures – and, like the staff, we are still waiting for clarifications. Questions concerning the scope of these measures – with doubts over their adaptability to our operations in the field, the implementation of our technical assistance and the real impact of cost savings and efficiency. The Staff Union was also there in

person to negotiate, as quickly as possible, measures involving changes to the Staff Regulations or collective agreements to meet the Administration's stated requirements. Negotiations are currently under way on ways to optimize the use of ILO office space, on the review of the travel policy, and on the specific measures that will have a direct impact on our working conditions. However, at this time we question their real objective and genuine contribution to the stated need for cost savings and efficiency.

Yet, the other "reform measures initiated by the Office to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its operations" included in the agenda document were not the subject of consultation, let alone negotiation. The Staff Union discovered this document on the eve of its publication. We also discovered, through media articles, rumours and whispers in the corridors, the possible locations to where some of us might be called on to move.

This document before you caught us unawares, as the deadline we had been given for proposing solutions based on collective bargaining was November of this year. Accordingly, we had set up our staff consultation process, which would enable us to make haste without rushing and allow us to put forward solutions that would best respond to immediate requirements, while keeping on track towards our common objective – to promote social justice with quality services that are best adapted to your needs.

Our ambition is, together, to define what efficiency gains might consist of and how they could be measured; to base our proposals on a shared understanding of the precise efficiency gains sought, in accurate cost-benefit analyses; and to distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term financial constraints, between temporary measures and necessary structural reforms.

We would have liked, therefore, to question the measures to decentralize services to less expensive countries, which are not for the moment based on any costed study; the same goes for the intention to make savings by getting rid of "costly" staff, rather than looking at the added value that our colleagues with decades of experience can bring to the quality of the services provided. We would have liked to ask about the implications for the ILO's vulnerable staff – our colleagues with disabilities, our colleagues from the LGBTIQ+ community, our colleagues with specific family responsibilities – who need a living and working environment that ensures they are respected and that their needs are taken into account. The ILO seeks to be a forerunner in diversity and inclusion; it must give itself the means to do so.

For the Staff Union, the priority in these negotiations should be on efficiency gains rather than on cutting posts, on quality of services rather than on short-term savings and, of course, above all, on people.

Local colleagues, who account for 47 per cent of staff in the regular budget, including 300 in Geneva, cannot be "relocated", unless their jobs are reclassified as international contracts, which raises a number of questions about the consequent legal aspects and financial impact. Let me be clear: relocating will not save all jobs, and the worst affected will be local colleagues who are facing uncertain fates.

It should also be noted that the forced mobility of international staff is contrary to the Staff Regulations. A move to other countries would therefore involve going against not only the current rules, but also the mobility policy that we have just renegotiated in 2025 with an approach to negotiations based on shared interests and aimed at improving and promoting better staff mobility. The risk of choosing one department or another to be moved, without even consulting on the criteria for this selection, goes against the very principles of fairness and equity on which this process should be based.

Arbitrariness should never be the solution.

We would also have liked to be able to put on the table proposals resulting from a process of staff consultations, giving the Staff Union a negotiating mandate allowing it to move forward on the basis of shared interests and within the framework of principles clearly defined by all the colleagues I represent, and valuing our in-depth knowledge of the inner workings of the Organization, its inefficiencies, its successes to preserve, its innovations to promote.

Lastly, we could have expressed our concern at the proposal to “align” in principle with the United Nations Secretariat, which could lead to a race to the bottom, more precarious working conditions and a loss of the Office’s expertise. Yes, we are privileged, but the current situation shows how much the structural problems linked to our contracts policy are leading to real precariousness and fragility.

We would like to call on the Office to reaffirm its responsibility to set an example across the United Nations system and beyond, in labour law, organizational integrity, contracts policy, inclusion and collective bargaining. This is a prerequisite for the quality of the future services we will be able to provide to you, but above all for our alignment with our highest values of decent work and social justice.

To those who might think that the United Nations system agencies would be able to defend part of the ILO’s mandate under the UN80 Initiative reform, where responsibilities would be mixed and redistributed, I would have called for a close look at the redundancy terms and conditions that are currently being applied, with no regard for rights or standards. These arbitrary actions, which are highly regrettable, also preclude any potential ambition these agencies might have to become the custodians and defenders of some or all of our Organization’s standards. I hope that Mr Ryder will be able to reassure you – reassure us – in the next hour about respect for the principles of social dialogue and to shed some light on these ongoing processes and their implications for a specialized agency such as the ILO.

Members of the Governing Body, we hope it is not too late to ask all these questions. Based on the guidance you will provide to the Office as part of the discussion of the next item, it is vital that the Office refrains from presenting the Staff Union – and the staff we represent – with a fait accompli of a mandate that it would deem to have received without first being able to hold the necessary internal consultations and negotiations.

I will say this in earnest: we will continue to support the Administration in proposing measures that give us the means to be more effective in our work, while respecting these rights and social dialogue, but we will oppose by all appropriate means measures that affect the employment and working conditions of our colleagues if these measures are hasty and without clearly identified benefits.

The Staff Union remains committed to the principles of change management, which are also the subject of joint guidelines under our Bipartite Collective Bargaining Committee, which state that “change and restructuring often provide opportunities to improve work organization and the content of jobs and for changes in roles and responsibilities (...) However, change and restructuring may also impact on the stability of staff – management relations and create concerns among staff affected by the change or restructuring” and therefore stress the importance of having “an approach which optimizes the interests of both staff and the Office”.

Members of the Governing Body – make no mistake. The staff are not rejecting change per se. Moreover, over the past two weeks we have strongly asserted our desire to contribute to solutions to address the current situation, which we know to be difficult and uncertain, and which calls into question the principles of multilateralism. We have also expressed our firm belief in the values of social dialogue.

As the elected representative of the ILO's historic Staff Union, I have no choice but to continue fighting to ensure that the framework for social dialogue and collective bargaining is respected internally. In this context of uncertainty, this is the cornerstone underpinning and anchoring my action, not only in the interests of the staff but in the interests of the Organization, which is yours as much as it is ours, and for which I have worked with passion and self-sacrifice over the last 24 years.

I have made a commitment to my colleagues, as Chairperson of the Staff Union, to remain faithful to these values and principles, and to move forward in the coming months within the framework that has been patiently developed throughout our joint history and perfected by our predecessors. I have also made this commitment to the Administration. I hope that this will, in fact, be a reciprocal commitment, underpinning each step in the coming months. We have a shared responsibility to demonstrate that, even in times of crisis, any negotiated solution may not be perfect, but it is the best. I hope that at the next Governing Body session, in November, we can all be proud and note with ease that this founding principle – social dialogue – has not been reduced to ashes but that, on the contrary, it will have allowed our Organization to decide on measures that will enable us to emerge from this crisis more resilient, stronger and more effective, so as to fulfil the mandate you have given it.

Thank you for your attention.

Séverine Deboos
Chairperson, Staff Union Committee
