



18 December 2025

Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union Committee 355th Session of the Governing Body (18 November 2025)

Madam Chairperson,
 Madam Vice-Chairperson, representative of the Workers,
 Mr Vice-Chairperson, representative of the Employers,
 Director-General,
 Members of the Governing Body,
 Dear colleagues and all those of you who are present today, either in this room or online,

On the edge of the abyss ... this is the metaphor that I am going to unveil to you gradually in the next 15 minutes – a metaphor which comes from a drawing done by the members of the Staff Union Committee at the end of June 2025, following the Governing Body session. After hearing your statements during this special Governing Body session, we wanted to see where we stood, as staff representatives, on the strategy and proposals to be devised to deal with the situation and respond to the expectations of the staff. This discussion was justified by the commitment I had made to the ILO staff and to you, to face up to our responsibilities and to hold the necessary consultations and negotiations, on the basis of the guidelines that you had provided to the Office during the discussion of document GB.354/INS/5, *The ILO in a changing multilateral environment: Towards better effectiveness and efficiency*. I had raised a number of questions on the proposals submitted during this discussion and stated that they were not the result of a process of social dialogue with the Staff Union. I had also made the commitment to continue to support the administration concerning proposals for measures which provide us with the means to be more effective in our work and in terms of respect for the rights of staff and social dialogue. By contrast, however, I had warned that we would oppose, by all appropriate means, the measures affecting the employment and working conditions of our colleagues, if these measures were hasty and not justified by specific, objective and transparent criteria, and were lacking in clearly identified benefits for the staff, the Organization and its constituents.

In the drawing, on the edge of this abyss, a character in a state of flux: the ILO. This character appears to be imposing – to put it mildly, with the weight of a centenary, the weight of the wisdom of the years and its strong attachment to its roots; but imposing also with the weight of the slowness and ineffectiveness that have built up with time throughout its growth. This character seemed to us all to be strong and unshakeable: reassured by what we had heard from the members of the Governing Body at the June session, reassured to a certain extent by this commitment to a zero nominal growth budget, an unambiguous statement about what brings us together: the anchoring of the values of social justice and social dialogue, a commitment to multilateralism and the recognition that this Organization's main asset is its human value, the women and men who work there in the four corners of the world with their

expertise, their professionalism and their passion. This character has changing facets, depending on the specific nature and the interests of each of the members of this character, with more importance attached to certain bodies – normative or operational for example, but recalling the importance of maintaining a balance between its components, with the recipe for that being an authentic social dialogue. This strength, the Staff Union as part of the whole, derives from its legitimacy *de jure* and *de facto*. *De jure* as according to the ILO Constitution, the Staff Regulations, our collective recognition and procedural agreement, and the case law of the ILO Administrative Tribunal, our existence is essential to the Organization, since the Union is the sole representative of staff interests ; thus, any measure affecting the terms and conditions of employment must be the subject of real collective bargaining. *De facto* since the Staff Union has the trust of more than 2,500 colleagues today, whose presence and support were very strongly expressed in June 2025 – with the participation of 1,500 colleagues – and we see it again today through the solidarity expressed in all the photos received and the presence of my colleagues here in the room and online, whom I thank. Their presence today, their contributions and actions in the past few months are a powerful demonstration that they want to be part of the solution, that they wish not only to be able to express themselves but be listened to and really heard, that the die is not yet “cast” and that they – still – believe in social dialogue.

The heaviness caused by slowness, institutional and bureaucratic malfunctioning and inefficiencies is of course a reality. A reality of which the staff is well aware and which obstructs the proper performance of its work. This is the reason for which the staff wished to make an enthusiastic contribution to the process introduced with the review team, and which expressed itself *inter alia* by means of the platform of ideas online, during open exchanges with the Director-General, and recalled the proposals already expressed through previous processes such as the recommendations issued on the reform of the field structure ten years ago, the survey on the ILO’s organizational health, and so on. These contributions have focused above all on substantive proposals, targeting the Organization itself and not out of concern to protect individual privileges which are often wrongly mentioned. The staff has moreover expressed, through a survey conducted by the Staff Union in October, the sacrifices which it is prepared to accept to deal with the necessary immediate measures to reduce the budget and limit the cutting of posts.

This character therefore stands at the edge of the abyss and the abyss is a frightening prospect.

For several months, the character has moved dangerously towards this abyss: it has emerged at a time when we have had to face the consequences of the projects funded by the Government of the United States of America being stopped, consequences for which we are still paying the price, with a number of colleagues who have had to leave the Organization despite their expertise in key areas of the ILO, or other colleagues who have been temporarily affected on other missions - precarious missions which have not therefore been perennial solutions to conserve and preserve this unique know-how - and which are again on the point of leaving the Organization. This abyss has loomed closer and closer, when the echoes have come from other United Nations system agencies: what was to be a celebration of 80 years of the United Nations has been transformed into a mass, disorganized and terrifying process of redundancies, devoid of transparency and with no strategic direction. Moreover, the proposals made as part of the reform of the specialized agencies remain very opaque for the Staff Union. We have called for leadership of the ILO which sets the example as regards staff matters and social dialogue within the reform process; we hope that there is still time ...

This abyss is just at our feet, with the liquidity crisis situation since September and the prospect of having to face up to a drastic reduction in the budget in the coming months.

Of course, the prospect of this abyss may seem different, depending on where the character is standing; on the way in which the character perceives the abyss, and this may be a source of divisions: the abyss may seem further away to those based in the field; it may seem not to be so deep for those preparing to leave the Organization for different reasons; but mostly it is frightening for a number of colleagues who have moved from asking questions to becoming anxious, and now seem unfortunately, to be resigned. ... Recently, it was the subject of a resolution adopted by all members of the staff during the Union General Assembly of 9 October 2025, who called on the Staff Union to draw attention “to the serious concern raised among staff each time one or more Member States do not assume their financial obligations to the ILO, thus leading to measures for which the staff often has to pay the price and compromising the capacity of the ILO to deliver on its mandate” and instructed the Staff Union Committee “to continue urging the Governing Body members to: instruct the Office to respect the Office’s social dialogue framework, engage in substantive discussions with the Director-General before any irreversible decisions are taken, and call on Management to take the actions outlined in the Staff Union’s Position Paper on the Administration’s draft GB paper (GB.355/INS/7)”.

Perceiving this abyss requires us to be able to measure it, to assess it. We need to have access to the necessary, precise information and data to devise a strategy and options that can be envisaged. In the past few months, it has been destabilizing to perceive that it is impossible to have access to clear and precise data which sometimes quite simply does not exist: what financial data are available, what hypotheses should be taken into account to protect against liquidity emergencies, what is the amount of the possible savings and on what budget lines, which Member States are finally going to meet their budgetary obligations, for what amounts and when? Of course, the character has, in its past journey, in its centenary history, encountered pitfalls and other similar obstacles. That said, the abyss is the first of its kind and combines a number of elements, as a result of which it is very difficult to define it as it develops very quickly. This is one of the major constraints which has faced the Union in the past few months: we have not been able to obtain the necessary and sufficiently precise financial and human data to be able to make a constructive contribution with the administration, as we would have wanted, to the proposals put forward. So, we are focused on the key principles to be considered in such a context, developing these aspirational principles which we will subsequently use as a basis for future negotiations. We have also called on all staff, through our process of representative consultation, requesting the different constituencies at headquarters and on the ground to adopt a position. Finally, we have been able to consolidate this position common to all staff at the Union’s global meeting held at the beginning of October, and which, and I quote the final declaration of the representatives of all duty stations: “Reaffirms its commitment to defending and protecting the rights and interests of all staff, ensuring that the ILO practices what it preaches through its mandate and maintaining the human being at the centre of its mission; calls for a fair reform process based on trust, justice, and solidarity; stresses that the true capital of the ILO lies in its people, whose commitment, skills and humanity form the strength and credibility of the Organization.”

We have communicated in a transparent and public manner the information which we had, our positions and proposals, hoping to move forward together with the administration. This implies knowing which hypotheses can be validated or those which cannot be contemplated. As things stand today, the Staff Union has unfortunately not received a response, other than in the form of new versions of the proposed plan.

The drawing done in June shows ground on the other side, beyond the abyss ... The artists drew a sun, lush vegetation, life, a promise of the future. The details of this “other side” are still, of course, to be defined. Nevertheless, we are now certainly less optimistic as regards this big sun, as in all cases we will need to eliminate a lot of doubts, come to terms with our disappointments and bitterness, which are now

driving many of us, as we fail to understand the grounds for decisions taken recently. We hope not to have lost – too many – colleagues and friends who would have stayed behind – a human tragedy, not only in individual terms but also as regards the expertise and value provided by the Organization's staff. Certain elements are and will nevertheless be essential for this other side to prosper, and that is what brings us together here: they are our values of social justice, multilateralism, independence and social dialogue. This other side must not be too utopian, in case it becomes unreachable. It must be built taking into account the lessons on what has worked so far and what must of course be changed.

What possible options are there in the face of this abyss. Turn back? Stop at the edge? Move forward?

In the drawing illustrating this metaphor, the staff representatives traced a bridge in June 2025, a bridge supported by our joint efforts. This bridge is the bridge of true social dialogue. In order to be solid, it must be founded on a common understanding of what social dialogue and collective bargaining are. This common understanding has been tested in the past few months. It often seemed that we were not speaking the same language, that we didn't understand each other, when we spoke about consultations, when we called for negotiation on the measures to be implemented, on the proposals to be devised. We were surprised that we did not receive any immediate positive reactions to our request to negotiate an agreement in order to deal with the staff adjustments. The Staff Union remains convinced that we have no other choice than that we must understand each other and take the necessary action to identify these shared interests and move forward together on this bridge. You have no doubt had to face up, in your organizations, your respective countries and your administrations, to austerity plans, to drastic measures affecting the staff and to difficult choices to be made. We have to learn from you and, at least the Staff Union, wants to be accountable to you for implementing social dialogue and what it can bring in the face of crisis situations.

Members of the Governing Body, I have delivered to you something which might of course appear to be abstract. I would have liked moreover to project this drawing for you, because it also showed the extent to which the staff can have other talents – in this case, artistic!

I didn't wish to enter into the details of the different subjects on the agenda of this Governing Body, commenting as is customary on the different documents. I have not gone into the details of the staff union's proposals and positions – they are available to you on request. The Director-General often says "we do not have the time". Indeed, the staff union and the staff that we represent are convinced that we do not have the luxury of waiting. We are concerned about time lost prevaricating, leading to unilateral decisions being implemented, which were not taken within a strategic framework and which no longer allow us to focus on what is essential. Decisions, which may be difficult, and which must be taken especially according to pre-established criteria and guided by negotiation, negotiation which must take place in the existing framework of the Joint Negotiating Committee, and must not be diluted in the different bodies and task forces, where staff, represented by the Staff Union, are not at the table according to the appropriate rules. The Staff Union calls for these negotiations with all its might so that the proposed solutions respond effectively to the combined needs of the Organization and the staff who work there.

I have one element of this metaphor left to share with you...The title which was given to the drawing: "The abyss of dangerous decisions".

Members of the Governing Body, Director-General, colleagues, let us not fall into this abyss as a result of dangerous decisions for our Organization, decisions which would have a negative impact on the ILO's capacity to deliver in the long term, which would compromise our fundamental values, and which would cast human beings into the background. Our decisions must defend the institution and its mandate in the

face of the current budgetary cuts and structural changes, and ensure that those who carry out the work are treated with dignity and respect so that they can fulfil their mandate in the future. The non-observance of its own fundamental principles – towards its own staff in this process – will compromise the ILO's credibility whenever and wherever it tries to intervene. The ILO is the sum of all the parts which we represent. Each of us must be able to participate on the basis of our mandate, our statute and our responsibilities for this decision-making, in a spirit of mutual respect. Without this balance, the ILO will lose its own balance. If it were to fall, we would all fall with it. Its survival will be the proof of our joint leadership.

Thank you for listening.

Séverine Deboos
Chairperson, Staff Union Committee
