



17 November 2020

Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union to the Governing Body (340th Session, 3 November 2020)

Chairperson, whom I congratulate on his election,
Director-General,
Delegates and colleagues,

It is my honour to deliver this address as Chairperson of the ILO Staff Union, representing two thirds of staff at headquarters and in the field.

I wish to begin by thanking the different groups of the Governing Body in this very unusual setting for giving me the floor to represent the Staff Union. This is justified for two reasons.

The first is that, following the highly successful ILO Centenary celebrations in 2019, the ILO Staff Union itself celebrated its 100th anniversary this year.

The Staff Union, founded in September 1920, chose the slogan “a century of struggle and solidarity” to pay tribute to the nine men and two women elected as its first representatives, as well as the staff representatives who followed in their footsteps, who work tirelessly at headquarters and in the field to represent the interests and rights of ILO employees and to occasionally remind the ILO and its governing organs of the Organization’s principles and values that they hold so dear.

The Staff Union is proud of the trade union culture that is so central and unique to our Organization. Therefore, despite the obstacles to the celebration of this event, the Staff Union has been able to hold most of its statutory meetings, the culmination of which was its entirely virtual global meeting in September 2020. The meeting brought together all staff representatives to update its vision and mission and adopt its five-year goals. Over the past ten months, the Staff Union has also been able to fully honour its mandate within the ILO, namely representing staff interests through constructive social dialogue.

This brings me to the second reason why the Staff Union deemed it important to take the floor. In these tough times, the best way for a trade union to celebrate its anniversary is to celebrate its usefulness and necessity. It is my duty to convey to you the feelings and mood among the men and women who have been ceaselessly working for their organization since the spring in the face of an ongoing public health crisis.

Like many workers around the world, ILO staff have been quick to adjust to these unprecedented working conditions and have therefore been able to start working immediately to tackle challenges directly linked to the Organization's mandate and objectives, which is clearly much needed.

I wish to stress that this has been possible first and foremost thanks to the constant, professional and logistical, but also kind and understanding, support of the Director-General, the Deputy Directors-General and the entire management team. The administration has rolled out a centralized COVID-19 information portal, a tool developed largely in consultation with staff representatives, which we welcome.

Indeed, in the light of the public health crisis, there was an immediate need for the management team and the Staff Union to work together closely, often urgently and rather pragmatically, for the safety and protection of staff. Internal social dialogue worked. However, certain adjustments are still needed to ensure that, for example, safety and health committees are properly incorporated at headquarters and in the field in the overall framework of consultation between the administration and the Staff Union. This is no easy task; international organizations have employees in all corners of the world and must adapt their safety, protection and return-to-office measures, in accordance with the national guidelines in place in each country in which the Organization has a presence, while ensuring that all guidelines addressed to staff are consistent.

Staff mental health must also receive close attention. Some of my colleagues have been teleworking for nine months owing to medical reasons or restrictions and are therefore socially isolated from the world of work, while others have had to overcome the virus and one of our number passed away. Other climate and industrial disasters, such as the Beirut catastrophe, have also occurred during this difficult time, severely affecting our colleagues in the field and increasing the sources of anxiety. It must be said that this pandemic – which we are still facing in early November – is starting to affect the morale of the troops, to coin a phrase. Although my colleagues have thus far demonstrated exemplary professionalism, commitment and resilience, sometimes at the risk of overworking, it is now more vital than ever that the administration not only sustains and extends the ILO's characteristic benevolent support but also provides the Organization with the human and financial resources needed to keep facing the new challenges imposed on it by the public health crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen, having made these two points, I must as usual express the views of the staff representatives on the different documents submitted to this session of the Governing Body, two of which have attracted our attention in particular.

The first is document INS/9, which proposes an ILO disability inclusion policy and strategy aligned with the recently adopted United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS).

The Staff Union has actively participated, both directly and through its federation, in the different stages that have punctuated the adoption of this strategy and has on many occasions, in various forums, decried the lack of understanding demonstrated by the United Nations administration of the vital role that trade unions should play in this process to improve the integration of workers with disabilities. Sadly, contrary to the statement in paragraph 2 of the document, the 15 indicators of the UNDIS accountability framework make little or no informed reference to this role. Fortunately, the fact that one of the indicators allows each organization to formulate its own policy gives us hope that the policy to be adopted by the ILO will indeed take into account, as mentioned in paragraph 5 of the document, “the unique structure, mandate and values of the ILO”. The Staff Union has shared its misgivings concerning the appendix to this document with the ILO administration. This draft has been rushed out with the sole purpose of complying with the ever growing demands of the United Nations administration. We believe that workers with disabilities and their inclusion in the world of work deserve better. This document contains several structural flaws, occasionally confusing general policy objectives relating to the Organization’s mandate with those directly related to its internal governance. This lack of clarity could significantly affect how the Organization applies this policy in future. If the ILO is actually to lead by example, this policy needs to be carefully considered and internal and external objectives and roles must be clarified. Nevertheless, the Staff Union is convinced that the Governing Body will provide guidance to the administration to this end.

The second document that the Staff Union would like to discuss is the Update on the Human Resources Strategy 2018–21. This document was submitted to the Governing Body for information, but the Staff Union was alarmed by paragraph 8 in particular, which subtly echoes paragraph 184 of document PFA/2. The paragraph calls for greater “agility” and flexibility in the Organization’s workforce and refers to the preliminary work of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) Task Force on the Future of the United Nations System Workforce. As is often the case, this initiative is well-intentioned as the United Nations expressed support for the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work adopted last year, but the first interim report caused an outcry among all United Nations staff federations when they caught a glimpse of their potential fate. The initial proposals are completely at odds with the Noblemaire and Flemming principles and could, for example, have severe repercussions for the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, since new categories of employees would end up without social protection or job security.

The ILO Staff Union finds it extremely difficult to grasp how the ILO administration, which is party to these interinstitutional forums, could allow the principles and values enshrined in its

own Declaration – namely, the need for a human-centred approach – to be tarnished and fail to oppose proposals that fly completely in the face of its values and principles.

There is undoubtedly a need to design a future workforce for the United Nations system and staff representatives would certainly have had many suggestions to put forward had they been invited to the discussion.

There is no desire among staff to design an increasingly precarious future of work for staff throughout the United Nations system. The independence of the international civil service as envisaged by its founders must be preserved to ensure that staff are able to independently fulfil their mission; to that end, job security is a *sine qua non*. The Staff Union will closely monitor the work of this task force as it is conscious of the indirect consequences that it could have on its own ongoing internal negotiations with the administration. If it deems necessary, the Staff Union will not hesitate to mobilize its members to safeguard job security, one of the unique characteristics of international civil service.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, as you have seen over the past ten months, despite the unusual and occasionally highly stressful situation, the Organization's activities in all areas are continuing thanks to the combination of elements that make it unique: an eminently dependable leadership team, tripartite governance and, lest we forget, a dedicated and defiant staff without which the ILO's activities and work could not move forward. They should be recognized and remembered in future programme and budget discussions so that, in better days to come, the ILO and its staff can maintain the quality of their activities with the same commitment that they have constantly demonstrated.

Thank you.

Catherine Comte-Tiberghien
3 November 2020
