

STAFF UNION BULLETIN
BULLETIN DU SYNDICAT
BOLETIN DEL SINDICATO



23 November 2004

**DECLARATION BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE STAFF UNION COMMITTEE
BEFORE THE PROGRAMME, FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE
COMMITTEE OF THE ILO ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD**

(291st Session – November 2004)

Mr Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee,
Mr Director General,

History is no stranger to coincidences. The day after the person who has the honour of addressing you on behalf of all the staff of the International Labour Office was born, the ninth meeting of the 111th Session of your Governing Body was already discussing matters concerning what at the time had yet to be termed the “United Nations common system of salaries, allowances and other conditions of service”.

The report of that meeting contains certain truths, which still deserve our attention today.

One member of the ILO Governing Body of the day considered that in such a matter, great importance should be attached to the opinions of staff members, who were the people mainly concerned, and expressed surprise that certain members of the Governing Body who so energetically defended the principle of ILO autonomy were prepared to give up that autonomy as far as the staff of the Office were concerned.

Another member of the Governing Body, who belonged to the Employers’ group, stated that his principal objection was that the staff of the Office would be subject to whatever regulations the United Nations deemed it appropriate to issue, and that the Governing Body would have to comply with the decisions of the United Nations. He also said that he considered it a fundamental principle that an employer should retain the freedom to lay down the terms of employment and retirement of his employees.

These statements are still relevant 54 years on. The staff of the ILO are concerned about the recent initiative on the part of the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC). On the pretext of modernization, the ICSC has for several months been involved in an unprecedented drive to call into question every single essential element of employment in the international civil service.

In effect, the ICSC, on behalf of the decision-makers in the United Nations General Assembly, controls all the conditions of employment and service within what has come to be known as the “common system”. This common system is becoming more and more invasive, and the ICSC is using it in many organizations, including the ILO, to attempt to push through so-called “modern” practices based on deregulation, flexibilization and the dismantling of the international civil service within the foreseeable future. This, too, is “globalisation”.

Although your Committee is regularly informed of ad hoc measures taken within the common system regarding salaries, allowances and conditions of employment or service, we are not sure that these occasional submissions give you a true picture of the extent to which, de facto if not always de jure, the Office has, perhaps unknowingly, abdicated its decision-making powers in key areas determining the conditions of employment and service of its staff.

You must realize that, contrary to practice within the ILO, where labour relations are governed by constructive dialogue between representatives of management and staff in accordance with the Staff Regulations, the workings of the common system are based on unilateral decisions made by a body whose members are appointed directly by the United Nations General Assembly, and whose sole obligation with regard to consultation with staff representatives and, indeed, with representatives of the executive heads of the whole United Nations system, is to take note of the “facts and opinions” of which one side or the other may wish to inform it.

The scope of competence which the ICSC would like to claim could include – and I quote from its Statute – “The broad principles for the determination of the conditions of service of the staff [and] the methods by which [these] principles should be applied; the scale of salaries and post adjustments; allowances and benefits of staff [and] the conditions of entitlement thereto; staff assessment; the classification of duty stations; job classification standards for all categories of staff; standards of recruitment; the development of recruitment sources, including the establishment of central rosters of qualified candidates, particularly at junior entrance levels; the organization of competitive examinations or alternative selection procedures; career development, staff training programmes, including inter-organization programmes, and evaluation of staff.”

If we are not careful, virtually all of our conditions of employment and service at the ILO could thus slip out of the control of not only the Director-General and the principles of collective bargaining that he holds dear, but also the Governing Body with its tripartite structure.

Of course, all this is nothing new, given that it is 30 years since the ILO decided – how could it have done otherwise? – to recognize the decision taken by the United Nations General Assembly to replace the body of independent experts which had since 1947 advised the various heads of secretariat on harmonizing conditions of employment and service with a body with wide decision-making powers, but with absolutely no obligation to carry out real consultations with those upon whom its decisions would be imposed.

Overall, tensions between us and the ICSC have until now been mainly confined, as far as the staff of the ILO are concerned, to certain areas where either alternative mechanisms could be

used as a form of counterbalance, such as the pensions system, or the decision-making process was sufficiently decentralized that the agencies could assume their responsibilities, such as the issue of salaries.

What is new, and justifies the increasing concern of staff which I echo here, is the encircling manoeuvre which the ICSC has been performing since the start of the new millennium, with an in-depth review of the pay and benefits system, conceived – and I quote the Commission’s report for the year 2001 – “as a management tool to enable organizations to manage their resources in a strategic manner and reinforce their capacity for carrying out an overall management review”.

What is also new is the general – I was going to say “worldwide”, or even “global” – context of sometimes extreme deregulation and liberalization which forms the background to the In-depth Review. We in the ILO Staff Union believe that the way in which the ICSC is approaching this large-scale exercise reflects fundamental aims which go a long way beyond concerns related simply to defining conditions of work and employment – in short, that the difficulties and conflicts we are faced with are not essentially administrative or bureaucratic in nature.

Since 2001, the pattern of events has confirmed the worst fears of the ILO Staff Union Committee, which we have felt since we heard what issues were to be considered – how salaries are calculated, limiting the duration of contracts, institutionalising the difference between contracts “with” and “without” the right to social security, performance-related pay, changing the form of job descriptions, restrictions on mobility incentives, rethinking the pensions system, etc.

It has rapidly become clear that, under the pretext of a “review”, which, in fact, was already under way, there has been a large-scale attempt to undermine most, if not all, of the principles which allowed a true international civil service to be established, without which the United Nations Organization would be no more.

What the ICSC has in mind is, in fact, to challenge, at one and the same time, the independence of international civil servants and their protection against arbitrary treatment, their job security and right to plan their careers, the prevalence of the rule of law, the uniqueness and continuity of the service they provide, the principles of equal treatment, a salary scale based on grades, promotion on the basis of experience and skills, access to guaranteed social security, the right to appeal, etc.

The documents prepared for the 58th and 59th sessions of the ICSC are blatantly clear about the Commission’s deliberate intention to pursue an unwavering policy that one could describe as “the privatisation of the international civil service”. It justifies this by saying that the differences between the private and public sectors are no longer as marked as they were in the past and that market concepts are becoming more and more widespread in national governments and international organizations. It claims that, in fact, for reform to succeed, a global vision is needed that will reconcile the economic needs of the organizations with the expectations invested by member States in their governing bodies.

Several studies by the ICSC now appear to be nearing conclusion – at least at a conceptual level. Approaches are currently being tested in certain programmes and organizations, and it is not impossible that some of the unacceptable or even absurd proposals noted above will, in the name of the “common system”, not be inflicted on the ILO against the will of the Director-General and the Governing Body. The ILO Staff Union therefore decided last June to inform the

ICSC on its position with regard to certain key aspects of the global review, and considered it imperative to share that information not only with the Director-General and his representatives, but also, through you, with the Governing Body of the ILO.

We also felt duty bound to inform the staff of the ILO and representatives of other organizations of our analysis of the situation and our concerns. In conjunction with them, we are developing initiatives to relax this stranglehold somewhat in areas such as local salaries, length of contracts tolerated and pension levels for General Service staff and national civil servants.

We are also in the process of launching other initiatives concerning performance-related pay, standards of classification and job flexibility, as well as the lack of any real consultation with interested parties – let alone collective bargaining – within the common system.

We will continue to reiterate that the staff of the ILO – and with it, we hope, all international civil servants – will not stand by passively and watch while a fundamental Article of the Charter of the United Nations is being called into question: “the paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity”.

The Director-General and the Human Resources Development Department have heard our concerns in this area. In this respect, I am pleased that we have met regularly – that is to say, before and after each session of the ICSC or other common system body – to share our thoughts on how the situation is developing and how to confront – together, where we can – the threats we may face. This is also mentioned in paragraph 4 of document GB.291/PFA/17, which you have received.

Unfortunately, however, the tendencies that underlie the destructive approach of the ICSC are also affecting areas that should remain within the competence of this Organization and under the control of this Governing Body.

We believe that it is not inevitable to go back on what we proudly call decent work, and this would appear to be borne out by certain information before you provided by management regarding the Human Resources Strategy.

Still, there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip. There has certainly been some progress – albeit partial – in areas such as:

- better protection and security for staff in the field and involvement of Staff Union representatives in the discussion of measures planned in this area;
- redefining of management and administration responsibilities within the Senior Management Team;
- the application of the collective agreement on the prevention and settlement of disputes, with time limits being met;
- employment of people with disabilities, even if the security constraints imposed on the headquarters building at this time of severe financial difficulty are not making access any easier;
- the development of a new mobility policy that should benefit all categories of staff, including those recruited locally, and clearly establish the rights and responsibilities not only of officials but also of the Office;

- the elaboration of codes of conduct for what we call restructuring and management refers to as organizational change – rules of conduct, of which the first is direct consultation of staff and staff representatives, a rule that we hope will be strictly applied during the absolutely necessary review of procedures applied in meetings (meetings such as the recent meeting of the Preparatory Technical Maritime Conference, where some colleagues had to work up to 32 hours consecutively – that is, without any break or rest, which is as incredible as it is intolerable – just to make up for a lack of resources combined with obsolete methods of organizing work);
- negotiations conducted in good faith concerning recruitment and selection – which is a positive thing even if there are still significant differences of opinion on certain points, particularly with regard to transparency of mechanisms and equality of opportunities among officials;
- the beginnings of real dialogue on the introduction of the IRIS project – a project on which information has been provided to you – dialogue that has made it possible to settle some of our concerns, even though we still have some doubts about the consequences of escalating costs, the way in which staff will be trained to handle this new tool, the way in which priority seems to be given to employing consultants from outside rather than updating the knowledge of ILO staff, the wisdom, or otherwise, of subcontracting maintenance work and relocating some sensitive equipment owing to decisions seemingly made with the influence of outside forces, in none-too-transparent conditions, and which could be detrimental to employment, data confidentiality and information security.

Yet neither this progress nor the good work of the Joint Negotiating Committee can hide the continuing, genuine difficulties of developing a human resources and social dialogue strategy that would be truly appropriate for our Organization rather than grafted on from some other context.

We are sorry to report that document GB.291/PFA/17 provides some other examples of what one might call abdication of responsibility. Beginning in paragraph 5, the document shows a tendency to substitute a kind of market logic for the requirements of the international civil service, with the mention of “downgrading or suppression of some posts following the retirement of incumbents”, as if the grade depended not on the job description but on the particular incumbent. I will not dwell on this further, since I have already, at your last meeting, drawn your attention to a situation that we see as incongruous at best.

In paragraph 6, management seems to be hiding behind “experts from the ICSC” – there it is again! – when it is in fact, referring to a private firm, to “work towards implementing the New Master Standard for Professional and higher grades”, and mentions consultations said to be under way with the Staff Union, among others, to finalize the specific details relevant to the ILO. I have to tell you that those consultations have not taken place; they are only now in the planning stage.

With regard to training and development, paragraph 13 seems to set little store by the collective agreement concluded in August 2001 on personal development plans (PDPs), preferring instead the so-called “principles of the new United Nations Organizational Learning Framework”. The contents of the Framework fall, as we all know, far below the ambitions you

expressed for the Office in this respect – even if the document does go on to do a little better in paragraphs 15 to 17, where it reports the Joint Training Council has finally been organized, three years after it was originally established.

In paragraph 17 of the document, concerning what are somewhat euphemistically called these days “domestic partnerships sanctioned by law”, you are told that the Office is currently in the process of analysing the implications of an internal bulletin from the United Nations – as if you had not already adopted a very clear position on this matter at the 285th Session of the Governing Body in November 2002.

We therefore feel that the management’s approach to human resources management is all too often subject to external influences, far beyond what could be justified by the situation – including the financial situation – of this Organization or the need for a rational harmonization of working conditions within the common system.

In this regard, we consider it important that this Committee, together with the Governing Body, show the will of the ILO to make its own decisions – within the prerogatives of the Director-General as regards staff management and the principles of collective bargaining. It is a matter of honour for the ILO that these principles be recognized under its own roof.

We are sitting today in the Organization that has carried out authoritative studies on working conditions and the effects of labour relations on the way enterprises work. It has been amply demonstrated that job insecurity and the flexibilization of labour contracts ultimately undermine efficiency. It therefore seems to me that we all have an objective interest in working together – staff, Director-General and Governing Body alike – to preserve a decent framework for an efficient and motivated international civil service, and it is my deepest hope that we will find ways to continue to work to that end.

It is with this hope that I thank you for your kind attention.
