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The ICSC: Why fight them?

The International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) was created to regulate staff conditions of employment and service within what is generally known as “the common system”, to which the ILO belongs. Under the supervision of the UN General Assembly, the ICSC decides on the principles governing the calculation of our salaries and the various benefits to which we are entitled as international civil servants. But the staff unions and associations only have a consultative role in decisions affecting their conditions of employment.

In recent years, the General Assembly has been asking the ICSC to come up with ways to reform the financial structure of the common system. The aim is to cut the cost of the international civil service through changes to the various components of staff conditions of employment. To judge by the way it is being carried out, it could, in the short term, spell the end of international public service as a key element in the functioning of our contemporary world.

In fact, this trend is not new. In the 1980s, there was mass mobilization of staff to fight the erosion of pensionable remuneration. These demonstrations succeeded in limiting the ferocity of the ICSC’s attacks. The staff rule changes imposed around that time brought ILO staff out on strike in defence of acquired rights, eventually resulting in the creation of the Voluntary Thrift Fund, a mechanism internal to the ILO designed to compensate for some of the losses caused by the deregulation.

What’s the ICSC been discussing lately?

We are concerned to observe that the Commission is becoming more and more intrusive, under growing pressure from UN member States following the global trend towards liberalized public services. The summer of 2004 saw us mobilizing to reduce the possible impact of a further review of pensionable remuneration. A petition obtained the success we were looking for and our representatives managed to change the agenda for future discussions. The ICSC is trying to foist so-called modern practices on the organizations, including the ILO. These are based on deregulation, flexible employment contracts and therefore, ultimately, the destruction of international public service. Globalization of a different kind.

The basic problem is that these changes, presented as inevitable, go against the mandate of the UN as it exists today. So far, the UN has been the only international authority with a specific mandate to fight against poverty, conflicts, etc. Every decision made through the UN is binding on the nations that ratify it. This all requires a body of independent and competent international civil servants, working in a secure environment and with competitive employment conditions. In recent years, we have mobilized on a number of occasions against the constant erosion of our conditions of employment. We have not always succeeded.

In fact, what the ICSC is proposing is a new vision of the world and its contradictions. The ICSC aims to put the ILO into competition with other institutions. But the fight against destitution and poverty cannot be part of the market of goods and services that is so dear to the WTO. In fact, the conditions of employment in the public service must take account of the close link between the values that are being defended and the vocation of the people defending them. For example, how could anyone imagine that it might be possible to measure in terms of competitiveness the commitment of a teacher in national public service who gets personally involved in order to share their knowledge with each and every child, no matter what the child's social or cultural background? Or that of an international official who takes a stand against social injustices, wherever they may occur?

The vision of the ICSC would lead to *a market in peace and security*, in which all players would compete without distinction: may the most profitable one win!

What does this mean for our organization?

For our organization, the end of the current contractual system and its replacement by a culture of subcontracting could, for example, result in the hiring of private lawyers based in Geneva or London, in order to satisfy the International Labour Organization's constitutional obligations, and the abandonment of any ambition to link our consultative role vis-à-vis our constituents with the promotion of the values and principles of the ILO. This practice of using consultants and subcontractors, already well established to meet some of the organization's needs, would result in a loss of independence and quality of service provided to the member States, and therefore a loss of coherence for the institution.

The end of staff independence = The end of public service

Given the high stakes, don't expect this ideology to come under debate by the common system any time soon, at least not before the UN has been relieved of its backbone: its own staff. If we do not resist these moves, the change will be made quietly and the trend will continue, becoming all the more virulent.

In the face of such peril, it is imperative to make ourselves heard. We need to show just how motivated we are in defending the ideals for which we struggle every day. We must mobilize through our staff unions and associations to make our determination clear to our respective managements – and demand that those claiming to represent us at common system level stop burying their heads in the sand. It will take more than that to make this storm pass!