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Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union

343rd Session of the Governing Body (November 2021)

Chairperson, Director-General, delegates and colleagues,

I have the honour of delivering this statement as the elected Chairperson of the ILO Staff Union, which represents two thirds of staff members at headquarters and in the field.

It is my duty to share with you the aspirations and concerns of the staff, and to ensure that the discussion is human-centred, as it has become customary to say in this house.

And I must say that, for all of my colleagues, the past year has been another trying one in many ways.

First of all, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a considerable impact on working arrangements for all staff, as the different duty stations were each subject in turn to periods of lockdown and return to the office. This really gets in the way of the feeling of belonging to “One ILO”. Admittedly, this dichotomy was offset by the Administration’s efforts to invent new ways of communicating and working together. But on a day-to-day basis, the Staff Union has seen from its continuous contact with staff how much the uncertainty over the end of the pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of some of its members. So there is a need to be vigilant and to put in place appropriate psychological support tools for the long term.

Still on the subject of managing the COVID-19 crisis, another significant obstacle – mainly in the field – is the lack of coherence within the United Nations common system on matters such as vaccination, confidential storage of medical data and the return to the office. This dissonance generates additional stress for my colleagues, especially those already working in premises shared with other organizations of the common system.

The ongoing management of the COVID-19 crisis was compounded by political, social and economic events in countries where the ILO is present. The anxiety-provoking and traumatic situations of colleagues in countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, and more recently Sudan, should be taken very seriously, especially since staff members working on the ground, mostly on technical cooperation projects, are very often more isolated and therefore more vulnerable. In this connection, the Staff Union recognizes and fully appreciates the efforts of the Administration, which has done everything in its power to ensure that these staff members are safe, and compares rather favourably to other organizations of the United Nations common system. However, ILO staff members are increasingly being exposed to all kinds of risks, just like staff of other organizations with a traditionally more humanitarian mission. Therefore, additional resources and new structures – ideally, consisting of both management and staff – are urgently needed for the future, to enhance responsiveness and effectiveness so as to keep everyone safe.

Allow me now to share with you the position of the staff representatives on some of the documents presented at this session of the Governing Body.

First of all, our attention has been drawn to document GB.343/PFA/4, on the ILO Information Technology Strategy 2022–25, which you have just discussed. Given that the staff representatives were not consulted in advance on the strategy, they reserve the right to comment after the fact. It is particularly concerning that at no point in the document do staff members seem to be valued or considered a key element to the success of the upcoming strategy. I must admit that they were quite shocked to find out that they were viewed primarily as an obstacle – resistant to change, poorly trained and oblivious to the risks of cybercrime and the ever-increasing security requirements. After everything that my colleagues – including those in the IT service – have achieved over the last 18 months and more to ensure that all of the Organization’s work could be performed successfully, they are given very little credit. In fact, we find it really quite offensive.

It is all very well to repeat over and over again that we have to take a more people-focused approach, but we also have to practise what we preach. The Staff Union is starting to get tired of hearing in multiple forums that new talent and new skills will be the cure for all ills. Does that make today’s talent tomorrow’s fools? Let’s be serious, the Organization has a moral obligation to nurture its talented staff and to have the decency and respect not to disparage them after they have been recruited. It is all a matter of striking a balance between that new talent and experienced staff members, of having the human and financial resources in the right places, and, above all, of showing tact and recognition. A word to the wise.

The Staff Union also learned in this document of a number of future projects with a considerable impact on staff working conditions, which the Workers’ group also mentioned earlier. The document refers to the digital divide between headquarters and the field, redeployment of existing resources, the integrated workplace management system, computer-assisted translation software and the digitization of personnel files, all of which are matters on which staff representatives have to be consulted. In their view, an IT strategy is not just about combating cybercrime or drastically increasing IT security, nor is it about developing tools so that we talk to each other only through computer screens. It may also mean exploring new ways of fostering the human aspect so that staff are able to get their work done, grow in their professional life and undertake lifelong learning – whether in the office or working remotely – while cultivating creativity, initiative and dialogue with their peers. And, of course, it also means staff having the right to disconnect and to maintain their individual freedoms. The Staff Union does not see any of these challenges and opportunities reflected in the document, which is extremely disappointing.

Unlike the document on the IT strategy, the document on the Human Resources Strategy for 2022–25 (GB.343/PFA/14) thankfully underwent all the necessary consultations with the staff representatives. Nonetheless, it is based on premises with which the Staff Union has long disagreed. These include comments concerning the definition of diversity and the assertion that the ILO absolutely must continuously attract new talent or risk becoming uncompetitive.

Although the existing Staff Regulations already encourage diversity (which the Staff Union fully supports), it is often in the implementation where problems arise, including in terms of gender balance and geographical and linguistic diversity, experience relevant to the Organization’s three constituent groups, opportunities for young people and inclusion of workers with disabilities. For example, although the ILO has achieved gender

equality at mid-level grades, it has not yet achieved greater diversity at the management level. This is a significant source of discontent among my colleagues. Similarly, the principle of geographical representation based on financial contributions has, for years, created an inaccurate impression of the true diversity within the Organization. Moreover, certain recruitment practices that do not follow the rules also hinder improvements to diversity. Thus, on the pretext that excellence is measurable only by the most advanced and prestigious qualifications, candidates from the worlds of business and trade unions rarely have an opportunity to showcase their skills. But there should also be a place for them alongside the most highly qualified specialists. Here again, it is a question of balance, and also of courage for the ILO, with its unique structure within the United Nations system, to equip itself with recruitment tools and procedures that truly meet its needs.

The Staff Union also takes issue with the underlying assertion throughout the Strategy that there is apparently an urgent need to continuously attract new talent, or else the ILO will become uncompetitive and therefore be unable to meet its goals. But I ask you once more, what about the existing staff? Moreover, what about the officials who are constantly recruited on technical cooperation contracts that are renewed year after year, who build up excellent knowledge of the Organization but seem to face ever more insurmountable obstacles to joining the ILO on a longer-term basis, despite the fact that they are already working, and will continue to work, on more than 50 per cent of the ILO's activities, without enjoying the benefits and recognition?

The ILO Staff Union is convinced that there is certainly a need to attract new talent in moderation, depending on the new programmes. But above all, the Organization has a pressing duty to invest in, capitalize on and develop existing skills, or else it will end up with staff who are rapidly becoming totally demotivated and lacking recognition. The latest staff satisfaction survey confirms that substantial work remains to be done in this area. One of the survey's most striking results is that most officials highlighted a lack of motivation and recognition. Many staff members, from all categories, see little chance of following a suitable or linear career path that reflects their experience and skills. The other noteworthy finding is that job satisfaction among women and persons with disabilities is significantly lower than that of the rest of their colleagues. The international civil service is not a temporary employment agency; it is a body of civil servants who, in order to feel that they belong to the culture and share the values of the Organization that employs them, require not only contractual stability to discharge their duties independently and with integrity in an increasingly hazardous international context, but also well-defined career development, support, training, encouragement and recognition in a workplace that is caring and that promotes work-life balance.

In that connection, I do not wish to conclude my comments on this document without sharing with you the great frustration felt by all staff members at the slow pace at which the Administration is handling the review of flexible working hours, despite the promise of negotiations this year. Yet, since the start of the pandemic, there has been sufficient evidence that increased flexibility in working hours and mass teleworking have not caused any change in the quality of services and work. In fact, these new ways of working have helped to improve workflows, empower staff, increase their accountability and develop a new work culture based on trust. It is therefore high time to update existing policies in this area if we do not wish to come across as an overly cautious and backwards-looking organization within the United Nations system. And of course, the interests of the staff must be respected at all times.

The last matter that I wish to raise before you today, although there is no document that addresses it specifically, is the never dull issue of the activities of the International Civil Service Commission. This year, 2021, sees the launch of the new cost of living survey to review the post adjustment element of international staff salaries. At the various duty stations, including Geneva, staff representatives and their federation have started participating in good faith in the preparatory work, but remain extremely wary of the ongoing process, because the substantive problems that caused the conflict between 2016 and 2018 still remain. It is therefore not impossible that the common system will find itself at the same impasse as it did four years ago. We will never resolve a governance problem through new, more or less flawed salary surveys. The Staff Union repeats, once again, that the only way of ending this conflict is by reforming the statutes of the International Civil Service Commission.

With your permission, Chairperson, please allow me to close with a few additional remarks. Very few ILO officials have the privilege of addressing this Governing Body, and even fewer have the opportunity to share the views, concerns and aspirations of the staff. I have had the honour of doing so on 15 occasions, including today, on behalf of the women and men who elected me, and it is a responsibility that I have never taken lightly. I would like to state once again how fortunate this Organization is to have such skilled and committed staff members whom it can count on in all circumstances. If I had only one wish in this final statement I am giving, it would be that the Governing Body always bear this in mind in all of its future guidance and decisions.