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Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union

344th Session of the Governing Body (March 2022)

Chairperson, Director-General, delegates and colleagues,

It is my honour to deliver this statement before the Governing Body for the first time. Please allow me to introduce myself. In addition to being Chairperson of the Staff Union, I work as a specialist in public services in the Sectoral Policies Department. I am from Puerto Rico and I am proud to be the first Latin American Chairperson of the Staff Union in over 20 years as well as the first from a non-metropolitan territory, one of the many distinguishing features of which is that the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) does not apply to its population.

First of all, I must begin my statement with a strong expression of gratitude to the Administration and security colleagues in Ukraine and at headquarters from staff members and the Staff Union that represents them. We stand in solidarity with our colleagues working in Ukraine and with its people, who have suffered the effects of an unwarranted belligerent act that contravenes all the principles of sovereignty and freedom of association that we defend at the ILO. We also continue to support our colleagues in the Russian Federation, who are directly affected by measures related to the war. The world will remember the actions of the Russian Government, which violate human dignity. We will also remember the courageous steps taken by the Administration and security colleagues to safeguard the lives of national and international colleagues in Ukraine. But we must not forget those working in the areas of health, electricity and other sectors whom the ILO has a mandate to protect and who are on the front lines of the war. They are all in our thoughts.

Second, I wish to thank the Director-General, Guy Ryder, for dedicating ten years to the Organization, a period during which social dialogue has been the norm. His leadership has been characterized by mutual respect between the Office and the Staff Union. We have negotiated numerous collective agreements and established a consultation mechanism that is unique within the United Nations system and worthy of the home of social dialogue. We wish him all the best in his future endeavours.

We recognize the Administration's efforts to protect occupational safety and health in these difficult times. However, we will face significant challenges in the short term as we readjust to working at the Office. There are colleagues throughout the world who never stopped working onsite, others who have been working remotely for the past two years and others who have returned intermittently, not to mention those who have not been able to see their families even during the toughest times. They all have different experiences, needs and interests that must be reflected in ways of working and acknowledged by their supervisors. In particular, we must recognize that the health crisis has had an impact on all aspects of our colleagues' lives and not just on their physical presence in the office. We are currently discussing with the Administration the revision of the ILO's internal occupational safety and health (OSH) structures and procedures, in order to guarantee an OSH management system which has appropriate resources and functions across the Organization.

The Office and the Staff Union are negotiating a flexible working policy and have resumed discussions on a new recruitment policy in what promises to be a very active year that will include various issues of importance to staff. The Staff Union has declared 2022 as the Year of Technical Cooperation Staff and is redoubling its efforts to advance the interests of these colleagues who currently represent 52.6 per cent of ILO employees and whose work has become central to our mission. These colleagues have supported water and sanitation management, helped to combat piracy and empower indigenous peoples and have done essential work in central offices at the global and regional levels. However, they do not enjoy the same working conditions as colleagues employed under the regular budget on the grounds that their income is paid from different sources. In any case, they are employed on such short contracts that they sometimes fear for their jobs if they try to exercise their rights. Regrettably, this is a recurring discussion in the international civil service, which uses contracts that are exempt from civil service rules.

This month, the Staff Union is also celebrating the Month of Diversity and is sharing various messages with staff. The Staff Union wishes to highlight the positive tone of the discussions on how to implement strategies on the inclusion of persons with disabilities. We also place great importance on the information contained in document GB.344/PFA/INF/5(Rev.2), entitled “Composition and structure of the staff at 31 December 2021 – Diversity outlook report”, submitted for information at this meeting. Although the document notes various efforts made by the Office in this vein, the Staff Union calls attention to the ongoing challenge posed by the gender imbalance at grades P5 and above. The Administration recognizes this challenge in document GB.344/INS/10, entitled “Results of the ILO Action Plan for Gender Equality 2020–21”, but we regret that this document hardly mentions staff at all. Furthermore, the Staff Union wishes to underline that, to take effective advantage of the increase in posts vacated by staff reaching the mandatory separation age, posts must be published at the same grade at which they were vacated. Similarly, we have observed that even in some of those professional grades where there is gender parity, more men are assigned to technical advisory and research roles, which leads to a gender imbalance in some secretariats of technical meetings. Geographic diversity also requires attention: although 30 per cent of all staff members are European, they account for nearly 50 per cent of staff at grades P5 and above. To increase diversity, the Staff Union suggests, for example, employing anonymized recruitment processes, which could reduce the risk of selecting candidates for reasons other than merit.

Following this statement, the Governing Body will discuss the ILO Strategy on knowledge and innovation across the Organization (document GB.344/PFA/5). This document contains a series of proposals that will affect the staff. However, the Staff Union was never consulted, despite the fact that the proposals cover a variety of elements that should have been the subject of consultations or negotiation; indeed, the Staff Union is not mentioned. Indeed, the issue of job descriptions, referred to in paragraph 12, is currently being negotiated without the Administration having suggested any of the elements mentioned here. The Staff Union believes that this document represents a missed opportunity, as it seems to be based on the notion that proposals that do not come from the Human Resources Development Department do not need to be the subject of consultations. However, this is not the case; to give one example, the Staff Union was consulted when the ILO Recognition Awards Programme was established, and it actively participates in its implementation.

We must remember that Article 10.1 of the Staff Regulations states that “the interests of the staff shall be represented in the Office by the Staff Union of the International Labour Office.

The Staff Union shall be entitled to make proposals for the improvement of the situation of officials, both as regards their conditions of employment and their general living conditions.”

Moreover, the Recognition and Procedural Agreement between the International Labour Office and the ILO Staff Union commits the parties to promoting the principles and rights enshrined in the various ILO Conventions relating to freedom of association. Furthermore, the parties are committed to engaging in collective bargaining in good faith on “issues affecting a group of staff members arising from day-to-day management and administration in the Office”. In this case, this collective bargaining has not taken place, as the Staff Union only had the opportunity to review the document once it was published. The Programme and Budget also did not provide for any proposals of this nature. It is worth remembering that the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations in its General Survey on Convention No. 151, published in 2013, observed that, “it is in the mutual interest of both the authorities and public employees’ organizations not to limit consultation to terms and conditions of employment and to extend the subjects covered by consultation to include issues of mutual interest, including the establishment of personnel policies in the public administration and managerial and human resource problems that may arise following a new form of organization of work or restructuring. [...] Indeed, consultation on these subjects, at the initiative of the authorities or of public employees’ organizations, is in many instances a means of preventing the occurrence of collective disputes and finding solutions that are more likely to be accepted by the public employees concerned and the public authorities.”

I reiterate that social dialogue has been the norm for ten years under the current Director-General. However, this is not the first time that it has been neglected. For example, the Office Directive on reporting misconduct and protection from retaliation, published in 2019, had to be amended after the Staff Union noted the lack of consultation on its potential impact on the staff. When organizing staff consultations in February and March 2022, as mentioned in paragraph 13 of document GB.344/PFA/5, the Staff Union was not consulted, and issues were discussed which should have been subject to collective bargaining. This model has reached the ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, which intends to review existing contracts and recruitment agreements by means of holding consultations with people who have not been elected to represent the interests of the staff.

I would like to finish my statement by referring to the event that will be the crowning glory of this Session of the Governing Body; you have the opportunity to elect the new Director-General. The Staff Union does not have any favourites, nor does it support specific programme-released proposals, but we remind you that any reforms undertaken by the person who occupies that post will have an impact on our employment conditions, on the morale of the workforce and on our capacity to carry out the mandate assigned to us. Any reform should seek justice and decent work for all colleagues, through social dialogue. You must take this into account when it is time to cast your ballot.