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Statement by the Chairperson of the Staff Union

341st Session of the Governing Body (March 2021)

Chairperson, Director-General, delegates and colleagues,

It is my honour to deliver this statement as the elected Chairperson of the ILO Staff Union, which represents two thirds of staff members at headquarters and in the field.

One year ago almost to the day, the ILO was beginning, alongside the rest of the world, to comprehend the magnitude of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its consequences for the Organization's governance, functioning and, of course, all of its staff. I will leave it to you to report on policies and changes in focus in other meetings, but it is my customary duty to tell you something of the mood of my colleagues in the extraordinary circumstances resulting from this pandemic.

First, I believe I can state on their behalf that they remain fully invested in their mission and objectives in the face of an already changing world of work that has been shaken by the pandemic. They are aware that all actors in the world of work – workers, business leaders and governments – who have been hit by the full force of this turmoil must benefit from the century's worth of expertise and competence of the Organization to which they belong. For my colleagues, 2020 was a year of constantly readjusting priorities to best meet the needs and requirements of constituents. Staff members have demonstrated the adaptability and flexibility that are frequently called for in this forum, sometimes going above and beyond the call of duty and despite working environments that, depending on the duty station, are changing, unequal and complicated. Some have had to juggle work and family responsibilities, like so many; others are expatriates dealing with serious isolation, far from their family; others have seen their duties reinvented; others still have grappled with the disease itself; and some have even lost their lives. In human terms, the ILO has paid a heavy price. The grief-stricken teams who have lost a colleague have needed special attention and psychological support to rebuild mentally to be able to function again.

Given the length of the pandemic and the uncertainty as to when it will end, staff members must clearly tap into their individual resources now more than ever to motivate themselves to keep on top of the challenges, and must receive constant support and encouragement from the organization that employs them. How fortunate that we are the ILO...

In these extraordinary circumstances, those three simple letters take on their full meaning, notably thanks to the Senior Management Team's ability to support and guide staff in overcoming these challenges. In circumstances like these, the need to boost collaboration and internal connection among everyone and the willingness to adapt internal rules and operational arrangements are the essential fuel for the sound running of the Organization. The Staff Union fully recognizes the Administration's efforts in this regard, which contribute positively to reinvigorating the sense of belonging to an organizational culture that has sometimes tended to fade in recent years. Of course, it is up to the Administration to turn words into action to ensure that all the suggestions and

good practices that have emerged during these difficult times are sustained. The Staff Union stands ready to engage in future discussions with the Administration on the need to improve certain regulatory frameworks relating to working conditions, such as the teleworking policy, and to strengthen the institutional framework on occupational safety and health so that all ILO workers enjoy the same protections, wherever they are. As a final note on the consequences of COVID-19, the Staff Union wishes to thank the Administration for all the steps it has already taken and remains at its disposal to engage in effective social dialogue to ensure that the future of work for ILO staff is indeed part of a “better normal”.

The activities of the ILO are continuing, and as the spokesperson of the staff members, it is also my responsibility to inform you of some of their concerns relating to documents before the Governing Body.

I would now like to turn to the update on the ILO Human Resources Strategy (GB.341/PFA/16). The Staff Union has taken note of the updated composition of staff, as have you all, and wishes to make a number of comments.

Now that staff on development cooperation contracts are in the majority for the first time, and although objectives under voluntary and regular contributions are now combined in the programmatic framework, the Administration can no longer be unaware of the unequal treatment of this category of staff with regard to their terms and conditions of employment.

The findings of a Staff Union evaluation are enlightening. Repeated violations of basic principles of “One ILO” in the exercise of these officials’ duties abound: lack of transparency in recruitment and selection; certain forms of violence at work; uncertainty until the end of a contract as to whether it will be renewed; inability to access training opportunities; limits on eligibility for maternity leave; basic security of staff members dependent on external financing, and so on. Of course, the staff members concerned only very rarely complain, as their continued employment is at risk.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of these workers, whom the Staff Union considers to be in precarious employment, are not involved in activities directly linked to the implementation of a development cooperation project that would justify their status. In such cases of “false assignment” to development cooperation projects, precarious contracts are too often used to have ongoing missions carried out at low cost and, for example, as a way around formal institutional recruitment frameworks and to bypass the safeguards allowing for fairness, transparency and ultimately the trust of this category of staff in recruitment processes.

Purely in relation to respect for staff members and for workers’ rights, those colleagues who manage to build a career through successive precarious contracts, at the cost of sometimes incredible efforts in terms of mobility or remuneration, must be treated as long-term workers, at the very least. After a certain length of service, they are entitled to claim the same rights as regular-budget staff members in matters of training, promotion, mobility and general career support.

All officials who provide their skills to serve the ILO’s mandate and who have a proven track record should be able to pursue a career within the ILO and receive appropriate recognition for it.

There simply has to be an end to this unequal treatment, which is tantamount to the very discrimination among workers that the ILO condemns in its position statements and recommendations. Furthermore, ending discrimination, particularly in accessing

salaries based on length of service, will be a top priority for the Staff Union going forward, in strict adherence with the founding principles of this Organization.

On another note, the Staff Union has unfortunately noted the limited success in terms of gender parity in senior positions, and the efforts yet to be made in relation to diversity and inclusion within the Office. In the Staff Union's view, these factors are closely linked to the lack of safeguards and transparency in the recruitment process for management positions, and the failure to identify clearly how staff diversity can be improved.

Furthermore, and directly linked to the alignment of the workforce with the Organization's activities, the Staff Union is particularly concerned at the repeated assertion in the document of the need to always recruit more qualified candidates, as if those recruited one year previously were no longer able to meet the high requirements on the basis of which they were recruited. The grass cannot always be greener on the other side; it is time for the Administration to tend to its own pasture. It is difficult for staff members to accept that, year after year, the Administration boasts in this report that it has provided them with a learning programme, which on closer examination appears mainly geared towards soft skills. If we wish to do something meaningful and equip staff to deal with the current challenges, the endless, albeit necessary, time management and communication courses must urgently be supplemented to provide existing staff with access to genuine programmes that allow them to develop their specialist and technical skills, and a real system for valuing and certifying the acquired skills must be developed.

Still on the same document, the Staff Union is also surprised by the timidity, tinged with wishful thinking, of the Human Resources Development Department with regard to managerial accountability, despite it being an area on which the Administration and the Staff Union have worked together, particularly to help strengthen the performance appraisal system and to improve staff members' participation in 360-degree evaluations of their managers. While that work did aim to improve managerial accountability for the benefit of the Organization, it was also intended to strengthen staff members' trust in the process. It is not merely a question of "expecting" that it will happen, as stated in the document, but of doing everything possible to make managerial accountability a reality.

Of course, this brings me to the broader issue of staff matters more generally within the UN system. We have paid particular attention to document GB.341/INS/7 on the United Nations reform. The Staff Union can only welcome the Organization's increased visibility in this vast reform process, but it reiterates the need for regular consultation with ILO staff representatives, in the field and at headquarters, when necessary. I am referring in particular to the paragraphs of the document that mention a future unified performance management framework and a need to harmonize contracts and to pool human and logistical resources. All these matters must be subject to due consultation within the ILO with a view to improving conditions, rather than a race to the bottom, given that the ILO is, in many ways, a model in this area. The Staff Union is also greatly concerned at the excessive workload placed on our colleagues in the field by this reform process; this calls for a specific evaluation and if necessary the allocation of adequate human and logistical resources.

Furthermore, the Staff Union is now paying close attention to the work of the task force operating under the leadership of the High-Level Committee on Management. Its alarming initial proposals shook all staff representatives to the core at the thought that both the very essence of the international civil service and its key features were

disappearing to make way for a worrying “Uberization” in the name of agility. The staff federations were later invited to join the task force, and the results are eagerly awaited.

Lastly, turning to document GB.341/PFA/INF/6, I must share with you the disappointment and weariness caused by the lack of significant progress in matters that have been left to lie fallow. Indeed, the Staff Union remains astonished by the incomprehensible stubbornness of the UN General Assembly in protecting its technical body, the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), rather than adopting responsible management measures to reform it. There is a high reputational risk in continuing to utter the same inaccurate information on the pension fund or salary-setting for the sole purpose of justifying political decisions taken almost three years ago. You will recall that the lack of a resolution to this conflict has meant that, here at the headquarters duty station and at other duty stations, the concept of “equal pay for work of equal value” no longer applies. This hardly reflects well on an institution that has just celebrated its 75th anniversary and that boasts of publicly defending fundamental rights, which include labour rights, on a daily basis.

The Staff Union will therefore once again keep a close eye on the decisions taken at meetings of the ICSC in the coming weeks and in the face of moves to refuse to postpone the upcoming salary surveys, in the middle of a public health and economic crisis and despite the fact that the revised methodologies have not been validated or tested. Sometimes just a few triggers are enough to turn the disappointment that I mentioned earlier into anger once again.

The UN system has the honour and good fortune to have within it an agency that specializes in working conditions, dialogue and social justice, and where internal social dialogue works, particularly in these times of crisis. So if we want to talk seriously about the future of work for the staff of the UN, its senior management and constituent assembly would do well to draw inspiration from the best practices being implemented within it so as to build lasting social peace from which the UN in general, as well as its staff, would only stand to benefit.