

# INTERVIEW

ALI TAQI,  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE STAFF UNION



Interview No. 12

PRESIDENT 1974-1978

## Question 1

**What motivated your commitment to run for President of the Union and what message would you like to convey to future Presidents?**

When the system of union stewards was introduced, I was chosen to represent my unit because no-one else wanted to. I was thereby able to learn about staff issues and the SUC's work. At the next SUC election, two rival slates presented themselves. I was included in one of them; I nonetheless submitted an individual statement. The SUC that emerged was sharply divided. Two important lessons were drummed into me over the following months: collective decision-making and collegiality in defending and implementing those decisions. Later on, when the time came to elect a new Chairperson, I was accepted as a compromise choice – mainly because no-one knew me.

## Question 2

**What have these years of presidency brought you; do you have an anecdote that remains in your memory?**

In terms of personal satisfaction, the gains deriving from Union Service were many (as were the frustrations but now – 40 years later, I try to think only of the former). Here are a few:

- (a) Contributing, along with the other members of the SUC and many supportive colleagues, to the protection of the staff and the defence of the Organization.
- (b) Getting to know and appreciate numerous colleagues at Headquarters and especially in the field plus many others from different organizations.
- (c) Enhancing respect for the Union on the part of the Director-General and key members of management (while admittedly incurring the hostility of various others).

---

(d) And, the most important personal gain to me, came from a meeting with the typing pools. There was an issue that did not affect the staff in general but deeply concerned and upset our colleagues in the pools, namely the allocation in the new ILO building of offices to the pools at a standard inferior to that applied to the rest of the staff. Practically my first act as Chairperson was to meet with all the members of the different language pools. To make me even more nervous than I already was, when I started speaking in English shouts arose of "En français, en français!" A spontaneous strike was in the offing: I promised that the SUC would do its best to win their legitimate demands for equal treatment; if it failed, we would make the strike official. We raised the matter with various members of the administration who tried to explain why the differential treatment was appropriate and failed to understand why people were angered by it. We gave notice of a strike. The DDG in charge of administration took me aside and asked whether I realized that the strike was scheduled to coincide with the forthcoming Governing Body session. I replied that indeed we did. In the end, the earlier decision was reversed – I think by Mr. Blanchard himself – with a consequent increase in the Union's credit. I've gone into this story for a special reason that will be clear from the next section.

## Question 3

**What are the 2 challenges and 2 major successes you have faced during your mandate?**

In the post-World War II era, the gravest threat to the future of the ILO was the withdrawal of the United States. In 1975, the then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sent a letter to the Director-General Francis Blanchard giving the constitutionally-required two years' notice of withdrawal. Notwithstanding the strenuous diplomatic efforts of Mr. Blanchard, the withdrawal became effective in November 1977. This is not the place to go into the reasons advanced for the US action or the political ramifications. The focus will be on the consequences for the staff and the Union's response.

The assessed contribution of the US represented 25% of the regular budget; the amputation of that amount would sharply curtail the work of the ILO and pose a severe threat to our jobs. Fortunately, no other country followed the US lead and several responded to Mr. Blanchard's appeal for voluntary contributions. The sums received nowhere near covered the deficit but they had some practical importance and great political significance. While all staff members were disturbed by the cutback in programmes, the Union as such was primarily concerned about the likelihood of staff reductions.

From the start, the SUC affirmed that it would oppose dismissals and contract terminations of WLT and FT colleagues alike. This was not such a no-brainer as it may sound. Many colleagues argued that priority should be given to protecting WLT staff, relegating the defense of FT staff to second place. Some department heads and other senior officials took the opposite view: they saw this as an opportunity to get rid of what they called "dead wood" – a common term which I found and still find extremely offensive when applied to our colleagues. Initially the administration vacillated on this issue. Proposals were submitted to the Conference and the Governing Body to abolish established budgetary posts. While we conducted a vigorous campaign against them, the proposals were adopted. Some of the anti-WLT contingent assumed that the individuals assigned to those posts – by an opaque and secretive method – would be liable to dismissal. They did not realize that legally several rounds of musical chairs had to be played before the colleagues left standing could be dismissed. We were prepared to fight a stubborn rearguard action to prevent such dismissals. Soon the Personnel Department and the Director-General realized that trying to sack WLT officials on this basis would require a complex, time-consuming and expensive process; engender tension and bitterness throughout the Office; and cause an industrial relations disaster. At the same time, the SUC showed its readiness to participate in a constructive programme to cope with the income shortfall while minimizing staff cuts. From then on, a more cooperative relationship developed between the SUC and the Personnel Department with the growing confidence of Mr. Blanchard and his Cabinet.

---

Realizing that mere resistance to all job cuts would be fruitless, the SUC endeavoured to find, mostly in consonance with the Personnel Department, the least harmful solutions. To summarize our approach -

a) Reductions in non-staff expenditure. Mr. Blanchard was skeptical. In a meeting with the SUC, he took great offense at my use of the word "gâchis": with my rough-and-ready knowledge of French, I had not grasped how strong that word was. He nevertheless agreed that we could try to detect potential economies and for this purpose launch a suggestions scheme. The results, in truth, were not substantial; failing to make the effort, however, would have been even more disappointing to the staff.

b) A recruitment freeze. This was a standard step in such situations, again resisted by some chiefs who were more worried by the effect on their own units than on the staff and the Office as a whole. Mr. Blanchard and Personnel knew it was necessary. Inevitably, some exceptions were authorized. A joint procedure was set up whereby requests for exceptions were examined by a committee of staff and administration representatives whose recommendations were submitted to the Director-General. To my recollection, all the recommendations were agreed upon by the two sides and accepted by the Director-General.

c) Redeployment. Transfers of staff between departments, between Headquarters and the field, and from regular budget to technical co-operation and other extra-budgetary projects were a key measure. While the main responsibility lay with Personnel, the SUC participated actively in identifying possibilities, discussing them with colleagues and often finding imaginative solutions.

d) Voluntary early retirement. This was a critical component of action to secure ineluctable staff reductions while holding involuntary terminations to a minimum. The SUC played a major and unexpectedly successful role in promoting the idea. At our request colleagues working on pension and remuneration matters calculated the amounts people nearing retirement age would receive if they took early retirement. I signed letters to over a hundred such officials with this information.

While some took umbrage, the great majority were surprised to learn how little they would lose and after some reflexion many accepted.

e) Act of solidarity. The most controversial initiative taken by the SUC was what we labelled an Act of Solidarity. We proposed a small cut in salary for the entire staff compensated by three extra days of leave (a kind of modest short-time working or *chomâge partiel*). The SUC was initially divided on this idea once the majority approved it, the concept of collegiality meant that all members publicly supported it. The staff was even more sharply divided. General meetings in the Governing Body room were standing-room only. Many interventions were aggressive. Some people argued that it was not the business of the staff to bail out the Organization and some called for strikes and demonstrations (against whom, we asked, as the budget cut was not the doing of the administration but of a member State). A vote of confidence in the SUC was taken and passed - had it been rejected, I would have resigned then and there. In the end, our proposal to hold a referendum was adopted. The referendum was held (I still have doubts about the modalities we used) and the Act of Solidarity was approved. The aftermath was violent criticism and dissension. The Union suffered a considerable number of resignations. A rival union was formed - I never learned how many people joined it and it quietly disappeared after a short while. Were the effort and the aggravation worth it? I remain convinced that they were. The amount saved was not enormous but still considerable. The greatest benefit for the staff and for the Union was the impact our action had on the Director-General and especially on the Governing Body. As a concrete demonstration of the commitment and loyalty of the staff to the Organization, it enhanced the credibility of the Union, reinforced political support for the ILO and strengthened the position of the staff against cynics and detractors.

The plan for protecting jobs achieved results beyond our expectations. No WLT officials were dismissed. The number of FT colleagues whose contracts were involuntarily terminated was limited to four or five. One of these was a very senior political appointee, who took it in good grace and when I encountered him years later remained friendly towards the ILO.

---

Of course it would be wrong to claim all the credit for the Union. The SUC's actions were far from universally applauded. Yet the Union ultimately emerged stronger as a credible and respected interlocutor on questions affecting the staff.

While this was, in my view, the most important achievement of the Union, it was by no means the only one. Without going into detail, these are a few of its accomplishments within the ILO and, in concert with the staff representatives of other organizations or through FICSA, in the common system.

a) Greater focus on the problems of field staff and heightened participation of their representatives.

b) Creation of a joint mechanism enabling colleagues to appeal against job evaluation and grading decisions they considered erroneous.

c) Resolution of a dispute over General Service salaries in Geneva, marked by a strike at UNOG, through negotiations between the staff representatives and the administrations of the UN and the Geneva specialized agencies (this is a long and complex story with both positive and negative elements).

d) Adoption of the Two-Track Pension Adjustment System after years of negotiations to resolve conflicts of interest between different duty stations, chiefly New York versus Geneva (I claim no credit for this result but the Union and ILO experts brought in by the SUC were instrumental in devising and promoting a solution to an intractable problem).

e) And, back to that meeting with the typing pools. It was attended by a young Spanish woman named María Rosa Alarcón Andrés. Recently arrived from Franco's Spain, she was bewildered to find herself caught up in a strike movement (a few years later she too was elected to the SUC). That evening, we met by chance at the bus stop. She did not yet speak French and her English was rusty as was my Spanish; still, we managed to communicate. It took only seven years for me to plight my troth and a couple of more for her to accept me in marriage.

