

# INTERVIEW

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FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE STAFF UNION



The ILO's first collective agreement was signed on 27 March 2000



Interview No 7

PRESIDENT 1999-2001

## Question 1

**What does the ILO Staff Union, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, mean to you?**

A staff union has always aimed to create a monopoly of workers' bargaining power to achieve their collective objectives. To me, the staff union committee means an elected leadership, mandated (i) to bargain with the employer on behalf of union members and (ii) sign with the employer binding collective agreements. Before I entered ILO, I was involved in national-level collective bargaining. Collective agreements were the primary vehicle to determine workers' conditions and ensure the country's industrial peace. When I joined ILO in 1982, I was surprised at two things. First, that many employees were ununionized. Secondly, the Administration neither recognized the Staff Union Committee (SUC) as a bargaining party, nor its eligibility to engage in collective bargaining because the common system determined wages and other conditions.

It took me time to realize that certain labor-management principles had to be adapted to a unique relationship within the UN system. The immediately visible employer must obtain approval from another, remote but rugged force: The Governing Body and the IL Conference. Internally, the ILO administration was change-averse and somewhat out-of-touch with the needs. Staff at all levels were increasingly frustrated with distant, corporatist, authoritative management. Many observed how some people - from GS to P to D level staff - were living in increasing fear. Fear for their jobs (increased precariousness), the dread of their bosses (some manipulated annual performance appraisals and some harassed outright, mostly with impunity), and anxiety that grievances were futile (internal justice system skewed in favor of management). That left some colleagues in severe distress. Other systemic issues, like gender equality, got mainly lip-service. I have been convinced that the Staff Union had the role to right many of these wrongs through systemic changes.

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## Question 2

### **What motivated your commitment to run for Chairperson of the Staff Union? What message would you like to convey to future Chairpersons?**

I was convinced that a trusted and proactive SUC was beneficial for the staff and management, hence for the Organisation. I was Chairperson for two years, from December 1999 to December 2001. I then continued to chair the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) (which conducted collective bargaining) during 2002 and until my retirement on 31.3.2003, at the request of Mike Shone, who succeeded me as SUC Chair. My motivation was to shift the focus of the SUC from personal cases to systemic issues. I knew that the ILO's political, financial, and operational standing depended on upholding principles. I also knew the Office was flouting (at least some) internally. ILO, which was supposed to provide the conditions of its member states' best civil service, was not doing so. SUC denounced the ILO for stonewalling against implementing one of its fundamental basic principles, namely recognizing the right of unions - and employers' responsibility - to engage in collective bargaining. But this argument carried weight only for as long as we would keep the moral high ground. Some of us had faith that we could prevail. I still recall the impact of (the late) Ditiro Saleshando raising his two arms, one without the hand he lost in a work accident in Botswana, roaring "I will vote with my two hands and my two feet" for resolutions demanding the Governing Body to pull its weight in favor of collective bargaining in the Office. Or the meeting with the Legal Adviser's Office admonishing me for using ILO email to send messages to the entire staff. Confronting the DG and the Governing Body required the courage to resist threats (and integrity to rebuff offers) and meticulous preparation of every encounter. Most of all, it required that the entire SUC be on the moral high ground. Three months into our mandate, we started to see results. The entire SUC was invigorated to broaden the scope. During my mandate as Chairperson (and Chair of the JNC), the SUC signed many collective agreements: Those agreements confirmed that we were an innovative, flexible, and cooperative trade union. We set a landmark for the entire UN system by demonstrating that negotiations with the Union led to a win-win solution. DG Juan Somavia could stand tall, and its Staff Union stood taller.

When SG Kofi Annan visited the ILO in 2001, I gave him a copy of our collective agreements and invited him to follow suit in the UN Secretariat and other specialized agencies. The SUC was also involved in the implementation of the CA and obtained tangible results quickly. We also pushed successfully to regularize many precarious contracts. Our success in changing the Staff Regulations led to establishing the Ombudsperson Office and the appointment of the first Ombudsperson, She helped relieve many pain-points within the Office. In my opinion, the two most significant achievements of the ILO Staff Union during the centenary have been creating SHIF as a mutual fund in 1922 and the Collective Agreements from 2000. I had the privilege to sign the first CA on behalf of the SUC. The dream-team during those two years included more than twenty people[1]. With thanks, I recall the efficient Secretariat run by Brigitte Pillonel and Johana van Rijn. My message to the Staff Union Chairpersons is this: I, and my fellow SUC members, were strategic but not calculating. We believed in what we set out to do. It boldened us to deliver solutions for all staff, not just those in conflict with the boss or the Administration. We took pains to understand the constituency's mindset. Several colleagues helped use UNION magazine daringly and wisely to communicate messages openly to the Administration and the entire staff. We expressed exact positions and an unbending determination to uphold them.



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### Question 3

**What have you gained from your years as Chairperson; do you have an anecdote that remains in your memory?**

What mattered most was that people – some of whom we had never met before – felt at ease to meet SUC members, raise issues, and seek advice or remedy. I was aware that some people distrusted my nationality. Yet, I developed excellent working relations (and in some cases even a friendship) with some such people. For example, Basharat Ahmad from Pakistan (he brought me a Pashtun leader's hat when he came to participate in our first negotiation session). Or Walid Hamdan and others from the ILO Office for the Arab States in Beirut. I consistently spoke specifics to peers and power and had to be better prepared than the interlocutors representing the Administration. The anecdote I recall occurred on 9 September 2001. I had an appointment at 3 p.m. that day. On the phone to New York, I tried to get first-hand information on the nebulous news that an attack occurred in Downtown Manhattan. I got no reply from the ILO liaison office. When my colleague arrived, I asked him to call a relative in New York, but that uncle did not respond. I recall telling my colleague that we were witnessing an event that will change the world forever.

### Question 4

**What are the two major challenges and two major successes you have had to face during your term of Office?**

The most challenging issue was convincing staff to join the Union. This was important since the legitimacy of SUCs depends on massive rank-&-file support. In my time on the SUC, we held several large meetings to solicit views, report on achievements, and explain implementation modalities. In addition to HQ meetings, we launched the first website of the SUC, we convened the first Global Meeting for Field Staff Representatives from ILO offices worldwide (Geneva, 13-17 August 2001).

'Face time' made a positive change always. Another problem was maintaining cordial relations with the Administration even as the SUC led a determined bargaining stance at the negotiating table. Alan Wild, the Director of HR, could comprehend that exacting negotiations were different from personal hostility. But many Senior Directors were much less skilled in such nuance. Some considered our negotiating stance as a personal affront and acted out hostility (during and outside negotiating meetings), which only emboldened our side and made compromise more difficult.

### Question 5

**In closing, what would you say to motivate newcomers to the ILO and, more particularly, young people to join the ILO Staff Union?**

I would say that union membership is akin to social security and health insurance: the more people enroll, the more robust the system. The more we see it help others, the more willing we are to belong, even when we do not need it. The longer one is in the system, the more likely one is to benefit from it. I would explain to new officials and remind serving officials that as ILO employees, we forego the right to invoke the national justice system for legal protection. Instead, the internal rules are the only ones that matter. And the SUC has a more robust standing in internal processes than any individual. Finally, I would remind young people that the ILO cannot protect its field staff as effectively today as in years past. The UN system no longer commands the halo of the supranational vanguard of planetary welfare and justice. (Think of the reputational damage of 'oil-for-food' or UN peacekeeping sex scandals or neoliberal policies on 'decent work'). Therefore, we need to stick together to enhance our ability to fend-off criticism and hold on to the ILO's mission. Joining the SUC enables young people to shape the only voluntary body that promotes all forms of solidarity.