

INTERVIEW

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A century of struggle and solidarity

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Question 1

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

The Staff Union is people. It is its members; its base. What that means is that in 100 years the Union has been challenged to remain relevant for thousands of workers – tens of thousands over this period, actually – from all over the world, its membership as diverse as that of the Organization itself. And it is this diversity – of nationalities, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations and gender identities – this humanity that makes the Union. It has struggled to transform itself; to keep with the times; to reflect, in its Committee, its representatives and its membership, this broad cross-section of workers. To me, the ILO Staff Union means people: People are its strength.

Question 2

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

The first time I ran for a position on the Committee, I'm pretty sure I came in dead last. Definitely at or near the bottom of the pile: A humbling experience. The Chairperson is elected by the Committee, and in the year I became Chair, it wasn't because I ran for it. If my memory serves (and it's getting more and more like that of a goldfish, so I'll rely on my peers in the Committee at the time to correct me) the position was kind of thrust on me. I went into the meeting as outgoing Deputy General Secretary, and walked out as Chairperson. I was in my mid-30's. Barely started my career. But to date, it's been one of the most rewarding – and without doubt one of the most challenging – experiences of my life.

A message for future Chairpersons? That's easy. From the time you decide to take on that mantle, you have a very simple, but very serious decision to make. Before you sit in that Chair for the first time – irrespective of whether you occupy it for a year, for six (as I did) or longer – you must decide: If you come to a crossroad and must choose between doing right by the staff, and doing what might be better for your career... if you are leaning toward the latter, or wavering at all, don't take that role. The Chairperson isn't there for him or herself. And while we all seek win-win solutions, at the end of the day, the Chairperson isn't there to please the Administration. You're there for the staff. For our members. Keep that squarely in the front of your mind – always – and you'll be fine.

Question 3

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

I gained so much in my decade in the Committee, and in my time as chair. I'm not sure I would've stayed with the ILO if it hadn't been for that time with the Union. So I guess, despite all the challenges, I gained a deep confidence and appreciation for all of the staff who make up our Organization, who work long hours, many under precarious contracts, and at times under very challenging conditions. Many of these brothers and sisters keep the values and objectives of the ILO firmly in their hearts.


My time in the union has left me with countless anecdotes, some of which remain inside jokes with members of the Committee, the Secretariat, or just one or two individuals (most often the latter). Sometimes our sister unions and associations look to us in the ILO Staff Union, yes because it's the International LABOUR Office, and yes because some of us have some background in the labour movement, but also because we have a bit of a reputation... I remember being in a field duty station in one of the Regional Economic Commissions. I was there representing our international federation, CCISUA, at a meeting of the International Civil Service Commission.

The staff in this particular duty station had recently suffered the enactment of a dual salary scale, effectively placing new hires on a wage almost half that of those already in post. They wanted to organize an industrial action. So, we spent a good deal of time, myself, our local reps from the ILO Office in-country, and the members of the UN staff association, planning the stoppage. The demonstration was peaceful, well-organized and made its point forcefully. I was happy to stand behind these staff members, mobilizing to show their strength and express their deep dissatisfaction. When one of the ICSC Commissioners caught my eye while walking (with a security escort!) through the gauntlet of workers chanting, "Transparency, Equal Jobs, Equal Pay!" he came over to me and said, "I should have known that with you here, these people would be out here demonstrating." Without even thinking I shot back, "You have it backwards, Commissioner. I'm here because THEY are here, not the other way around..."

Question 4

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

Perhaps the biggest challenge I faced was when, soon after I took office, we were faced with the challenge to fundamentally re-profile the Union itself. We decided to start an organizing campaign, meeting with the staff of different branches and units, where they were. We brought the coffee and croissants, and welcomed an informal chat with anyone who wanted to join. One time someone I'd known since almost my first day on the job – but who herself was working on TC – said to me, "You know why you don't have more people turning out for these meetings? More people in the Union? Look around the table at your next Committee meeting – and I don't mean look at their faces – but look at their contractual situation. As a TC staff – as a precarious worker – I don't see myself in the union." She was a member, and told me a hard truth.



That stayed with me as I scanned the room in the next Committee meeting, and then later as we sought to recruit staff on TC, sought to understand better their issues, and to represent them, both in HQ and in the field. Whatever policy that came forward for discussion, we needed to, reflexively ask, "How will this affect our TC colleagues? How will it impact precarious staff?" We established a TC working group in the Union, with members drawn from a variety of projects and programmes, to ensure that the union's action reflected their needs and interests. Shifting the ILO Staff Union is a bit like what I imagine steering an oil tanker must be like. It takes time... But I'm proud that we did the work.

I'll pick a shorter challenge for the second one (otherwise this will never get published...it's starting to look like the Union Bulletins I used to write which required heavy editing by Catherine and Martine!): Maintaining a peaceful work environment in the Secretariat can be a challenge. We moved at a million miles (ok, kilometres) an hour and it was only because of our secretariat that we were able to achieve half of what we did. The challenge? Getting them to put up with my union music. The solution? Headphones. Which incidentally didn't stop my singing. Nobody's perfect. But I was proud to work with this dedicated, professional team. Brigitte and Johanna, then joined by Céline, and then Julia...and Nico (my partner in crime) and now Chloé. We - the people who keep the Chair warm for the next Chairperson - owe them a lot for everything they do to keep things moving for the staff. Si "ça bouge au Syndicat", c'est grâce à eux.

We had a lot of success in my time in the union, thanks entirely to our members, our reps and our dedicated staff. The biggest success was the Global Day of Action in November 2010, starting in Fiji and working its way around the globe with the rising sun...and culminating in a, er, postponement of the Governing Body session of that afternoon. From this strike, we succeeded in securing our right to freely - and without prior review or authorisation - send messages to the staff, as well as our right to offer a formal contract of employment to our legal adviser (among other things).

Question 5

In closing, what would you say about motivating ILO entrants and especially young people to join the ILO Union?

I would suggest - with a great deal of humility - that if staff, including young staff, need to see themselves in the union. I'd challenge the Committee to keep the answer I provided under the first point squarely in view. Young workers need to identify with the union; they must find their place as part of its diverse membership, as part of being in the ILO, as part of being a worker. Many of the young staff in the Office today are more precarious than ever. But they are also coming up in a generation of young workers who recognize the value of solidarity, who know that there has never been a better time to mobilize, and who know there is no better way to make their voices heard. They will find their place in the Union, and it's up to the leadership of the Union to see to that. Get that right, and the rest is easy.

That's what the ILO Staff Union is about.

