

INTERVIEW

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FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNION



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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 centenary of the ILO Staff Union brings to mind the cataclysmic atmosphere of 100 years ago; 40 million deaths and casualties from WWI and the more than 50 million deaths from the global pandemic that followed WWI.

Yet in such extraordinarily difficult times and to the great credit to the ILO's founding tripartite members, a Staff Union was established, putting into practice the ideals of the ILO in its very own workplace.

To the SU then fell the heavy responsibility of establishing and leading by best practice what had to be the "gold standard" for all Staff Unions of the other agencies and ultimately the UN system. On one hand the SU had to be inward-looking in matters of workers' rights.

On the other it also had to be outward-looking and mindful of all other workers of the world most of whom did not have union protection and who depended on their relationship with and the protection of their very precious natural environment.

Now 100 years later we are again in the throes of a global COVID pandemic, we live in a world weary from ongoing and prolonged and pointless conflicts and our natural environment is being over-exploited by a greedy few. Are we really better off today?

So yet again the world looks to the ILO and the SUC to guide and shape a new "normal" and a better more sustainable world with work while realising that it is senseless to return to the COVID world as we knew. In any case the "old normal" is no longer an acceptable option, and now is the right time to reset the paths to better futures.

Question 2

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

As a recent arrival in Geneva I was impressed by the remarkable work of the previous SUC and their achievements motivated me to offer my support but not expecting it to be as their Chairperson. That was however the decision of the SUC members, many of whom I did not then even know that well.

As a social democrat I had benefitted from a better education than my parents thanks to the way they had voted and the strength and resolve of the union movement and its political influence in both New Zealand and Australia.

It was my duty then to make my contribution and I had always wanted to give voice to the many ILO "real field" TA staff on ST or FT contracts staff that I had worked with in the Asia-Pacific, Africa and the Middle East. I hoped also that they too could also aspire to more permanent positions at HQ and the Regional and Country Offices.

Likewise, I was keen to see more ILO personnel already on secure contracts gaining from the opportunity of "real field" hands-on experience, so that the ILO could be more effective and better place.

My message to future Chairpersons is be prepared to have to remind the SUC and ILO management that from time to time they need to reflect on the fact that they are looked to as role models for social justice and the protection of workers' rights both within and outside of the organization and yet the world of work is largely non-unionised.

Endeavour also to ensure you leave the SU and ILO staff in a better position at the end of your tenure than when you started and that you continue your support of the union movement even after your retirement.

And never forget to use your sense of humour especially at the right time. Even in the darkest of times it can be the trigger for surprise results and even better than expected outcomes.

Question 3

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

My most precious memories are of having had the privilege of working closely with a very capable SUC team of multi-national and multi-cultural elected members and a particularly dedicated support staff with shared values. As well I had the privilege of having alongside me a fully independent UNION magazine editorial board of outstanding individuals that was not backward in capturing the mood of the office in great cartoons and in writing about our key issues so very well. Fortunately for me I also enjoyed having the support and wisdom of the ILO former union "elders".

Our SUC team did indeed have an excellent workplace culture. Little surprise then that the many reform campaigns of the SUC and the UNION editorial board regularly invited energised debates and solidarity throughout the organization around the water coolers and over coffee.

Good workplace cultures, depend on ongoing and vibrant cooperative, conciliatory and consultative social dialogue between management and staff if there is to be any hope of a successful and productive working environment.

Sadly, much as we tried, such an ideal working environment was noticeably and by design quite absent during much of my term in office.

During those times management dialogue with the SUC had all but been deliberately stalled and management regularly and foolishly failed to practice in-house what the ILO expected all of its staff to practice outside of the house. I had no hesitation in drawing this to the attention of the Governing Body in my address to them in 2002.

Immediately prior to that address to the Governing Body I had chaired a meeting involving another large crowd that had gathered to listen to the address to the ILO staff and 40 other UN Unions by the eloquent international human rights barrister and academic; Geoffrey Robertson QC and other eminent members of the ICJ.

Robertson had been engaged by the SUC to prepare an independent expert legal opinion on the basic reforms needed to bring the ILOAT into line with international human rights conventions. Importantly this address verified that the ILOAT had indeed failed to guarantee an independent and impartial judiciary, failed to provide fair and public hearings and failed also in the matter of due process rights.

In short Robertson made it very clear that the ILOAT followed “an antiquated arbitral model” and was a “dinosaur of a tribunal”. Management were not amused!

Robertson’s address to the ILO and the 40 UN agency unions did however become a turning point in the SUC’s campaign for fundamental reforms of the ILOAT despite the management being initially quite flummoxed even feeling ambushed.

Their initial reaction was to scramble to defend their inaction after nearly a year of discussions with the SUC by feebly and falsely suggesting the expert opinion expressed by the SUC amounted to personal attacks on them. Then unsurprisingly negotiations recommenced; and so they should have!

Question 4

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

The unreal situation of living and working in a “UN bubble” without recourse to an internal system of justice, except on administrative matters, became very much improved when the previous SUC and HRD agreed to a series of Collective Agreements and the appointment of an Ombudsman...

These actions by senior management did little for the ILO’s reputation as the UN’s champion of social justice and model of excellence in human relations matters. It is however important to record here that during her short term the Ombudsman did a wonderful world-class job in her work and her loss to the ILO was immeasurable.

There were many challenges faced by the SUC and some of these were highlighted in the controversial Staff Bulletin 1291 and included reference to;

- Fighting for the rights of those who had ended up on “precarious contracts” (including through a petition signed by 800 staff), which resulted in many months of unanswered correspondence and the SUC being accused of “harassing” management over their inaction. The poor dears!
- Negotiating the need for an in-house “Joint Safety and Health Committee”; while little was being done for staff office accommodation, safety or the safety of ILO staff working in conflict zones around the world. Negotiations ended only in words but not deeds from management. Straight out incompetence and irresponsibility!
- Finalizing the sign-off on the HIV/AIDS Collective Agreement by management was an exercise in deliberate procrastination by management even nine months after management had agreed to compensate staff for the full costs of HIV/AIDS medication. This uncompassionate attitude was indefensible!
- The SUC making sure that no precious funds were wasted on the DG’s ridiculous “Tropic garden” idea for senior management on the 10th floor. A rare victory in which humour won the day!
- Our campaign for the removal of discrimination of the partners of staff with same sex partners when it came to employment and health insurance benefits. A particularly serious matter which became unnecessarily bogged down until management finally did the right thing .
- The great favour we did for the DG in thwarting of the pathetic design/ “aesthetic abomination” of a crazy new logo then being considered for the ILO. Our well-meaning, if not at times satirical intentions were never really appreciated! We very rightly smiled when claiming victory for stopping this brain-snap idea.

Question 5

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

Joining the Staff Union is simply a “no brainer”. Newcomers are working in an organization established to promote and defend social justice. All newcomers to the ILO need to see their organization as a very special and precious UN agency and not as just another employer.

In the harsh reality of a neo-liberal world, the ILO and the UN will increasingly be attacked by those who do not wish to see greater equality, so the SUC has to continue to be the conscience of the Office and hold strongly to retaining and improving conditions of employment in a changing world.

And union solidarity should not cease to be part of your life when you retire. I encourage you all to join both the Section of Former Officials of the ILO as well as your local Chapter of FAFICS. UN pension conditions and the ILO after service health insurance (SHIF) matters require regular and careful monitoring by retirees and your support to your local National Chapter in this respect is crucial...

Finally maintain a sense of humour and "Kia Kaha"... stay strong in supporting union solidarity ...yes.it's a lifelong commitment....and it's also the right thing to do....

