

INTERVIEW

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FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE STAFF UNION



Interview No. 11



PRESIDENT 1982-1985

Question 1

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

The Staff Union is an integral part of the ILO. An International Labour Office without a Union to represent its staff would betray its *raison d'être*.

Question 2

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

From the outset, it seemed obvious to me, as a staff member of an organization seeking to promote justice through social dialogue, to become a member of the body representing its staff.

After a few years, at the end of December 1981, I presented myself to the Committee to take a more active part in the work of the Staff Union; the Union was then faced with serious problems. (See below). After a year, colleagues on the Committee encouraged me to run for the presidency. I remained in this position for three years, three exciting but also trying years. After that I returned to my post in the International Labour Standards Department. I find it difficult to give advice to future chairpersons, who will have to work in a very different environment from that of the last century. I imagine, however, that they will have to continue to fight against the decisions of the bodies of the common system. Within the ILO, they will have to try to reconcile the sometimes conflicting demands and aspirations of the staff as a whole. One thing I have learned from my experience is that the Union is only strong if it has a united staff behind it.

Question 3

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

My years as President first taught me to get to know the Office, the diversity of its services and its staff better. I learned to understand the workings of the Governing Body and its groups, as well as the importance of the UN common system and therefore the need to work with staff unions and associations in other organizations. I have learned to listen to different points of view, both in the Committee and in the General Assemblies, and to try to find a collective viewpoint. I learned to negotiate. I experienced camaraderie and solidarity. This experience enriched me and was useful for the rest of my career.

Question 4

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

The ongoing challenge has been to resist the constraints imposed by the UN system. When I took over the chairmanship of the Committee in December 1982, three sensitive issues were under discussion: pensions, professional salaries and general service salaries. On these three issues, our grievances were the result of the implementation of decisions taken at the level of the common system. The DG, Francis Blanchard, although sensitive to our requests, had limited room for decision and had to obtain the agreement of a Governing Body the vast majority of whose governments did not wish to deviate from the common system. As the negotiations on wages were running up against a wall, we evolved them into a comprehensive negotiation, where, unable to achieve satisfaction on wages, we sought concrete progress on a range of issues that were problematic for the ILO and which fuelled the frustration of the staff, the Gs in particular.

With regard to pensions, the DG had been convinced that under the UN Joint Pension Fund scheme, Geneva-based staff were at a serious disadvantage compared to those in New York. With his agreement, we negotiated with the ILO Pension Service a supplementary pension scheme specific to the ILO, whose benefits would complement those paid by the UNJSPF. The negotiations, in the course of which we came close to a strike, resulted in May 1983 in an agreement containing measures, some of which, at the sole discretion of the DG, were of immediate application and others, requiring amendments to the Staff Regulations, had to be approved by the Governing Body. The DG also undertook to submit the negotiated supplementary pension scheme to the Governing Body. Certain measures provided for in the May 1983 agreements are still in force:

- the closure of the Office each year between Christmas and New Year ;
- the compensation for overtime worked by the P's at the International Labour Conference; and
- a system of personal promotion.

On the pension side, the supplementary scheme was rejected by the Governing Body. However, in response to the introduction in the ILO of a reduced scale of pensionable salary following the decision of the United Nations General Assembly, the Committee, together with FICSA, took the initiative of a legal defence strategy. This strategy, which involved a series of coordinated appeals to the ILO Administrative Tribunal, resulted in important precedent-setting ILOAT decisions on the concept of acquired rights.



Another agreement reached in the wake of the May agreements of 1983 is the Understanding of 6 June 1984 on Strike Arrangements, when we were threatening to strike for compliance with the May agreements. This agreement deals with the arrangements for exercising the right to strike in the ILO, and provides for the establishment of a list of essential services in the event of a strike. It was not implemented under my chairmanship, but has been implemented several times since then and continues to be in force.

Question 5

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

The account I have just given of my experience on the Committee of the Staff Union shows sufficiently, it seems to me, how necessary and useful it is, both collectively and personally, to be a member of the Union and to participate actively in trade union action.

