

A familiar figure is leaving the ranks of the Syndicat Committee. After 10 years as Treasurer, then General Secretary and above all a member of the Bureau of the Union Committee, Yvan Poulin has well earned a semi-retirement. He brought to the Union his good humour, his commitment and his enlightened expertise as a militant trade unionist. We miss him already, and we know that he will stay by our side and, why not, come back to us in a few years' time. While we await his return, we wanted to interview him about his commitment to your Staff Union.

Question:

What does union involvement mean to you?

In my experience, an effective union commitment has to be personally concerned but absolutely disinterested. It's natural and human to want to improve aspects of the working lives of people like ourselves, but we have to be careful not to fall into communitarianism, to keep an open mind to all points of view on a given problem in order to try to get as objective an assessment as possible and work in the right direction.

Trade union commitment must be oriented towards our fellow human beings, with the aim of preserving and improving the employment and working conditions of the majority of our colleagues.

What opportunities do you see for the Union in the year ahead?

The Union has begun the courageous task of reviewing its internal processes, and I'm convinced that this is a huge opportunity to improve its overall efficiency. In addition, the new Committee has brought in new members, all of whom bring with them their own experience, their own vision of the Union and their own experiences. All this is a rich resource that the Committee and the Executive Board must capitalise on to maintain and improve their links with staff in the field and at headquarters.

Finally, new technologies (and COVID) have enabled members in the field to get closer to the Committee at headquarters, by communicating more effectively with all staff. For example, General Meetings are now accessible via Zoom, and Committee meetings are always in hybrid mode, which means that regional members can actively participate. I think we need to think about further optimising the link with our colleagues in the field, so that they feel they belong to a single Union.

That said, all these improvements come at a price: the time and energy available. To ensure that the workload and commitment are well (and better) distributed, all the members of the Committee need to invest more of their time according to their skills and knowledge, so as to relieve the members of the Executive Committee to some extent. It's a worthwhile effort, because it gives added personal meaning to your commitment to the union.

What message would you like to pass on to all your colleagues?

Join a union if you haven't already done so, become a player in your own employment and working conditions and help to preserve and improve those of your colleagues.

I know that this message is very militant and does not appeal to everyone. But it is essential.

When the President speaks to the Board of Directors, when the Joint Negotiations Committee meets, whether the Union represents 30% or 80%, they will not be listened to in the same way. And the Union works to the best of its ability on behalf of all staff, without distinction or discrimination.

Being a union member is above all an act of solidarity for all other colleagues, because every member counts and every voice must be heard.

So many people are not union members because they don't have the answers to the questions they have about the Union, without really making the effort to find them....

Nor should it be forgotten that the ILO Staff Union is the oldest, most experienced and strongest of all the Staff Unions and Associations in the United Nations system. It is taken as a model by most of them and even sets the standard within the federations, and many envy us our negotiating power.

What have you gained from all these years on the Staff Union Committee, and do you have any anecdotes that stick in your mind?

I've always said that joining the Committee was like being born again. I spent my entire career in support services (FINANCE and INFOTEC) and, before joining the Committee, I had no idea of the sometimes cruel reality of the world I was working for. Coming face to face with reality has been full of surprises (and not all of them good ones) and has taught me a lot.

My time at the Committee also gave me the opportunity to learn negotiation techniques, which were also very useful during my two years as General Secretary of CCISUA, our federation. I also learned how to take notes for the Committee's minutes, which I very quickly discovered I hated. But all in all, my time on the Committee was a continual learning process for me, and I learnt to trust my own abilities as a negotiator and conciliator.

For the anecdote, I'll go back to my first participation in the JNC. I can't remember what I said, or on what subject. What I do remember is that during the debrief afterwards, Catherine Comte-Tiberghien nicknamed me Gaston Lagaffe.

You have to learn from your mistakes, but that nickname stuck with me for a few years 😊. I was much more careful about what I said afterwards.

What challenges and successes have you encountered during your tenures?

There have been many. The first challenge I faced was the lack of visibility of the Union's actions for staff. So I joined the communications team and proposed a system of newspaper headlines that would be changed weekly. It was my first success and it's still working today on our totem screens in front of the lifts. It was perhaps the easiest to set up too.

There have been other challenges along the way, not all of them successful. Signing up new members is a daily challenge, getting some people to listen to their point of view, trying to find viable solutions where opinions are totally divergent, making someone understand that their request is unreasonable, creating a forum for discussion between managers and staff. These are recurring challenges that have accompanied me throughout my trade union life.

What challenge(s) do you feel are still "unfinished" and that you would have liked to see come to fruition?

I have one major challenge that remains unfinished, and yet it's the one that got me to agree to become a member of the Committee. There's a French saying that goes "les cordonniers sont les plus mal chaussés" ("the shoemakers are the worst shod"), and that also applies to ILO staff.

In 2013, I asked for the Union's help through its President, Chris Land-Kazlauskas, to try to develop an idea that would respond to a historical social injustice: international civil servants have no unemployment insurance. At the time, he took the opportunity to recruit me as a member of the Committee.

10 years later, there have been several opportunities and attempts to discuss the idea with the Administration, but it has still not been developed for various reasons that I won't go into here. This is despite the fact that some people in the ILO administration and several ICSC members have fully recognised that such insurance is sorely lacking and would be a valuable addition to the Common System as a whole. Perhaps in the context of the negotiation of new contractual provisions, the Administration and the Union will succeed in developing this idea, which has already gone beyond the germination stage.

To conclude, what would you say to young people to encourage them to join the Union?

Trade unionism may have been born in pain more than a century ago, but that doesn't mean it's outdated. New generations find it harder to envisage a career with a single employer and don't always see the point of joining a union, mainly because of their potential for nomadism and the ease with which they can bounce back and forth according to the events of their working lives.

However, it should not be forgotten that it is thanks to trade unions and their century-old struggles that current working and employment conditions protect them in various respects, such as equal treatment, protection against discrimination, health and safety at work, membership of a pension system, fair parental leave, part-time working opportunities, standardised flexible working arrangements that guarantee acceptable conditions and protection for both employer and employee, etc.

Union member or not, everyone benefits, because the Union represents ALL ILO officials, of course, but as I said earlier, joining a union is above all a question of solidarity. "United we negotiate, divided we beg" is the motto of our Union and it sums up the reality perfectly.

If you don't see any personal interest in it, think of the collective interest, you're part of it.