

Statement to the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly

by

Staff Unions of the United Nations Secretariat, Funds and Programmes

*Delivered by Ian Richards, Vice-President of the Staff-Management Committee and
designated representative of staff*

Agenda item 139: Human Resources Management

Friday 4 March 2016

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

It's great to be back here at the Fifth Committee.

Thank you for providing the 70,000 staff of the United Nations, many serving in the world's most difficult and dangerous duty stations, a voice at this session and for taking our concerns into consideration.

There's much to cover with two years of backlog and I'll be brief.

Non-staff personnel

Allow me to start with the JIU report on non-staff personnel (A/70/685).

We are very concerned to see that 67 percent of consultants and contractors perform regular staff work, of which 32 percent work in administration.

Yet our colleagues are denied access to leave, health insurance and a pension. And there is little or no oversight on their recruitment, or gender and geographic origin.

We support the approach of the report.

Temporary appointments

I'll turn now to the Overview of human resources management reform (A/69/190) and the section on contractual arrangements.

On temporary appointments we are concerned at management's proposal to extend the normal time limit from one year to two, contradicting what "temporary" means.

Staff on temporary appointments are already penalized with reduced leave and benefits. This is bad enough for one year, let alone two.

The current one-year limit was introduced to incentivize managers to recruit good staff for which there is ongoing need beyond a year, onto fixed term

appointments, through the staff selection system, with its oversight and checks on gender and geographic diversity.

However, if you can make one change for temporary staff, it should be to recognize equal pay for equal work and provide them comparable leave and benefits to their colleagues.

Continuing appointments

On continuing appointments we welcome progress on the latest review and we support management's proposal that performance management reports, established for less than a year, for example when a staff member changes duty station, be allowed to count towards qualifying for a continuing appointment.

Staff selection

On staff selection, we regret the continued delays in filling vacancies, reported at 213 days.

But this under-reports the reality as it does not include the time between a post becoming vacant and the vacancy being advertised.

This allows managers to fill posts temporarily for extended periods, below the radar, before advertising officially.

It stifles career development, especially for entry-level staff and deflates staff morale. It also shows a lack of appreciation for the resources provided by you.

We therefore urge you to review how vacancy periods are measured.

Performance management

On performance management, we hope you will support our joint proposals to revise the current framework. Improvements include greater flexibility in the composition of rebuttal panels, and more clarity on applying performance improvement plans.

However, as staff we also recognize that strong performance requires ongoing feedback from supervisor to staff member, something today's annual tick-box process does not cover. At the request of staff, the Staff-Management Committee (SMC) is working on new proposals for you.

Pension Fund

Talking of performance issues, allow me to draw your attention to problems at the pension fund, where newly retiring staff must wait six months before receiving their first pension payment, despite having monthly bills to pay. This is unacceptable. The UN must meet its obligations on time.

This follows other problems at the pension fund, including repeated attempts by the fund's CEO to disassociate the fund from the UN, low staff morale, retaliation against whistleblowers, and chaotic scenes at last year's board meeting.

Staff have started a petition urging the Secretary-General to replace the CEO by someone with the skills to fix the fund's problems and restore staff morale. The Secretary-General has heard us and has put the CEO on a performance improvement plan, for the backlog to be reduced from six months to zero by end May. We are watching closely but still believe a new CEO is sorely needed.

Staff well-being

Returning to the report on human resources management reform and staff wellbeing, we note that the 40 percent of the disability pensions awarded by the pension fund are based on mental health diagnosis, while the worldwide percentage is 25 percent.

We understand this reflects in large part the stress and strain faced by our colleagues in difficult and dangerous duty stations.

To this end we regret the removal of accelerated home leave in C duty stations. We call for it to be restored, and for more safety and welfare support for our colleagues in hardship locations.

Permanent resident status

On permanent resident status, we hope you will support our joint proposal that staff need not rescind permanent resident status in a country other than their nationality on joining the organization.

As the organization seeks new talent for Agenda 2030, it needs to recruit from an already globally mobile pool of expertise. Top talent will not forsake a hard-won permanent resident status for an initial one-year UN contract.

Activities of the Ethics Office (A/70/307)

On the report of the Ethics Office, we are concerned at lack of progress on whistleblower protection.

While discussions at SMC have reached agreement on what should constitute whistleblowing, management refuses to allow judicial review for whistleblowers denied protection from retaliation.

This contradicts the recommendation made to us by Judge Otis of Canada who authored a report on the subject. It ignores UNDT judgment Postica versus the Secretary-General. And it disregards the findings of the independent panel on how the UN dealt with child rape in the Central African Republic, which highlighted serious flaws in the independence of the Ethics Office.

Amendments to the staff rules (A/70/135)

Mr. Chairman, while I am on the topic of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse, I am pleased to inform you that the SMC, at the request of staff, is preparing a comprehensive policy proposal.

So we are mystified to see the Secretary-General rushing to propose, under amendments to the staff rules, that accrued annual leave not be paid to sexual offenders who are separated from the organization.

Colleagues in UN organizations active on this issue tell us this proposal was not researched and may be ineffective. Being caught is a greater deterrent than losing leave. And applying a penalty that varies according to accumulated leave, creates an arbitrariness that is legally weak.

We therefore ask that that this rushed proposal be declined in favour of a credible and effective package.

Interns

Allow me to end on unpaid internships. You may be aware of the UN intern who slept in a tent on the shores of Lake Geneva.

The ensuing media coverage brought to light our policy, unlike many agencies in the common system, of not providing interns with a stipend to help with living costs. UN data show this results in only 42 percent of interns coming from non-OECD member states; states that represent 82 percent of the world's population.

This shows unpaid internships filter out young people from developing countries and under-privileged backgrounds, denying the UN access to a dynamic and emerging pool of talent. At the same time, UN staff are uncomfortable asking interns to work for free, against international labour standards.

We propose that the Secretary-General prepare a report on how interns could be provided stipends, taking into account practices from specialized agencies.

In conclusion

In conclusion allow me to thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished delegates for your time and for considering our concerns.

For ease of reference, our recommendations are summed up in a table on the last page.

Thank you.

Summary of recommendations

<i>JIU report on non-staff personnel (A/70/685)</i>	
Non-staff personnel	Support approach recommended by JIU.
<i>Human Resources Reform (A/69/190)</i>	
Temporary appointments	Do not extend normal period beyond one year. Provide staff on temporary appointments with same benefits as those on fixed-term appointments.
Continuing appointments	Allow performance reports of less than a year to count towards eligibility for continuing appointments.
Staff selection	Include in data time taken from post becoming vacant and being advertised.
Performance management	Endorse the revised framework.
Staff well-being	Better measures for staff in hardship duty stations, including resumption of accelerated home leave in C duty stations.
Permanent resident status	Discontinue the requirement for staff to renounce permanent resident status of a country other than that of their nationality.
<i>Activities of the Ethics Office (A/70/307)</i>	
Whistleblower protection	Require judicial review of decisions not to protect genuine whistleblowers
<i>Amendments to the staff rules (A/70/135)</i>	
Sexual exploitation and abuse	Do not implement rule on not paying annual leave for sexual offenders as it is under consideration at SMC as part of a comprehensive policy against sexual exploitation and abuse
<i>Other subjects</i>	
Pension fund	Reduce the pension payment backlog to zero and start the search for a new CEO
Interns	Request study on providing stipends to interns, taking into account practice in the common system