



## 42<sup>nd</sup> Staff Union Council

2024-2025

Ref. SU-42-5

## Minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting

held on 27 August 2024 at 1:30 p.m. via MS Teams

*Adopted on 27 September 2024*

**Council members present:** Naima Abdellaoui; Dominique Chantrel; Mohamed Chiraz Bali; Tigest Desta; Cíntia De Lima Cardoso; Philippe Duparc; Marius Gologus; Ursula Hermelink; Laura Johnson; Jean-Luc La Planeta; Dan Lin; Rowland Palairet; Catherine Louise Peck Arif; Janet Puhlovic; Ian Richards; Bradford Smith; Phillip Thomas.

**Council members absent:** Marian Aggrey; Saba Al-Nadawi; Cédric Jacquot; Nicole Lewis-Lettington; Begoña Martínez Alfonso; Marko Stanovic; François Subiger; Radouan Toualbia.

*The meeting began at 1:32 p.m.*

### 1. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted as reflected below.

### 2. Adoption of the minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting

The minutes of the 4th meeting were adopted without changes.

### 3. Report of the Executive Bureau

The Executive Secretary reported on behalf of the EB on its activities and recent developments:

- In response to the news on the dismissal of UNRWA staff members without reportedly a proper investigation, CCISUA staff federation, of which SU is an active member, had written to the Secretary-General regarding the issue.
- The campaigning efforts of the parents of children with disabilities were ongoing and the SU had a debrief with the parents concerned after the ICSC dependency meeting. All parties involved agreed that the situation in many duty stations was untenable for these parents. Advocacy on raising the benefits cap continues, with some indications that changes may be considered in the future. Meetings with parents were also held in Geneva together with UNSMIS representatives.
- SMC in-person meeting report was finalized and shared with all staff in the form of a broadcast.
- ES made a statement at World Humanitarian Day, which was celebrated on 19th August. ES's statement covered humanitarian workers: UNRWA staff, UN staff and other humanitarian workers arbitrarily detained in Yemen and Sudan. SU also contributed to the flowers for the event.
- JNC: 2 meetings took place that focused mostly on SHP, office moves and building closures. Management informed that it was not expecting to close the Palais campus over the Christmas end of year period as no cash shortage was expected during that period. Management committed to allow staff flexibility during heat waves and, to conduct air quality checks in the H building (this was later reversed by UNOG). SU would also ask to extend air quality checks to interpreter booths. Management would also reply by the end of August to SU queries on Appendix B and the organization of work shifts for security service that was on hold for several months. It was also promised that security staff would be provided with the break room by the end of the year. It was also agreed that management would review the possibility of granting 5-year contracts to the DoA staff that were eligible for continuing appointments. Staff representatives also asked the management to share the SHP report prepared for the General Assembly (GA), which was confidentially provided to the officeholders. Management also organized an ad hoc JNC with the SHP team to brief on the report on Friday, 30 August. SU would use this opportunity to propose inputs.
- SU leadership had been invited to attend the HR policy briefing on the new guidelines on step determination. Once the GA decided to prevent internal candidates from being treated equally on

promotion by a change in the staff rules, the only way to ensure equal pay was to enforce the rule of placing external candidates at step 1. Unfortunately, this disadvantaged temporary staff who were treated as external candidates. OHR had revised the guidance to allow for higher steps to be awarded, in which it was stated that heads of entities could award higher steps dependent on experience up to a maximum level. At the briefing, it was clarified that, despite the wording about discretion, OHR expected the highest possible step to be awarded in every case. Staff representatives should advise temporary colleagues of this.

- SU has been informed that the Swiss government may ease legislation on naturalization as recommended by the report commissioned by the Federal Migration Commission. SU would follow the developments in that area since it was an important issue for many staff.
- SU leadership would meet the ECE Executive Secretary the week after to discuss various issues brought up by the staff. A survey was sent to ECE staff ahead of that meeting to ask for, among other things, their concerns about flexible working arrangements since the ECE management was intending to restrict them. A town hall with ECE staff could then be organized.
- An OHCHR survey was also planned in order to prepare for the meeting with the OHCHR change management team.

The Council deliberated on the new guidelines on step determination and noted that many complaints had been received on that. It was suggested to raise awareness of staff and managers that the heads of entities are expected to be using their discretion and re-recruited staff are supposed to be granted the maximum step possible in each case. Members also requested for some written clarifications on the OHR's position, and it was agreed to send out a broadcast on the issue and share the relevant policy guidance. ES also clarified that more information on the expert who would carry out the air quality checks would be requested from UNOG DoA and that the testing was supposed to take place that same month when most of the staff were back from holidays. The Council members underlined the importance of hiring an external entity to carry out air quality testing to ensure that the results are unbiased and asked the EB to further look into this.

#### **4. Finance committee**

The committee informed the Council that the financial audit was in progress. Some documents were missing due to an unfilled position of Administrative Assistant and the team was working to find those.

#### **3. Office moves and available facilities**

DES updated on SHP progress and office moves. She also shared a schedule of meetings and shared the timeline of the opening and closing of various UNOG buildings due to SHP. The timeline was readjusted due to lack of construction capacity and materials. According to the adjusted timeline, the SHP was expected to complete by the end of 2027, but that could be further delayed. The SHP team has pointed out that the renovation was not a major overhaul but rather revisions and updates of electricity, water, and heating systems and did not include building and office repaint. Some works had been ongoing in building E but it would only be fully closed after the ILO and WHO conferences next summer in 2025. The library had been reopened due to financial liquidity improvements and the cafeteria would be closed when the E building is closed. Other options to replace the cafeteria would be provided, including the opening of the delegates restaurant and bar to replace the cafeteria and several grab and gos placed around the Palais. The UBS branch had left the Palais in June when their offices on the 4th floor and their servers on the 7th floor of building E were closed and they could no longer operate using their secure internal network; UBS is expected to return at the end of 2025 when building C reopened. Alternative options for cash withdrawal were being explored.

Four entities were planned to move from H to S1 building – UNOG DG's office, Office for Disarmament Affairs, parts of UNECE and UNCTAD. OHCHR Motta building would close and around 650 staff would move to H building. Palais Wilson to remain open until the end of SHP. Updated move dates: first moves to start late October till mid-November; OHCHR to move from November until January 2025. 2-month notice would be given ahead of the move. The hotdesking ratio of 6.4 desks for 10 staff would apply to the entire Palais, including the historical buildings which might lead to decreases of desks and reduction of space for staff and SU would closely follow the developments to avoid congested offices. User group meetings for staff moving were planned to start in September. Due to the renovation, 300 to 400 parking spaces were lost and about 1,600 remained. With the expected OHCHR moves, a shortage of parking spaces may be experienced. However, if staff continue to follow at least 2 days of telecommuting, the existing number of parking spaces should suffice although some staff may need to park in remote places of the campus.

#### 4. Update on the SMC

Two SMC ad hoc meetings have been held since the last Council meeting. At the first meeting, a special post allowance (SPA) was discussed. The staff side did not object to updating the SPA policy proposed by the management paper, which aimed, among others, to limit the duration of SPA payments. However, management assured that exceptions would be possible for those who occupy higher level positions beyond the one-year limit. The staff-side strongly advocated to explicitly clarify exceptions in the policy and were waiting to see what language is included in the draft policy.

Another paper discussed was on arbitrary implementation of alternate working arrangements (AWA) and flexible working arrangements (FWA) in similar situations. While under FWA, staff could voluntarily request management to work outside of the office, the UNOG DG's decision to close the Palais at the end of 2023 to save money due to the liquidity crisis, forced staff to work in an alternate work arrangement under the guise of FWA. Management reassured that they would revise the relevant AWA guidance and clarify the differences between AWA and FWA to the HR network and offices which were not in compliance.

Financial situation and liquidity crisis was another topic brought up at the meeting. Staff-side questioned the persistence of the liquidity crisis measures in light of new data showing that the financial situation was better now than a year ago and the use of liquidity situations as a reason not to follow the rules, GA resolutions and staff-management agreements. The paper prepared by the staff-side proposed to agree on the framework and criteria for establishing a liquidity crisis, which was not supported by the management. Management informed that the UN Secretary General would communicate with staff next month to share updates on the liquidity situation and the controller would have another town hall on the issue.

At the second SMC meeting it was decided to set up a working group on facilities for staff representation. It was noted that unlike UNOG, some entities were charging staff unions and staff clubs for using the facilities (e.g., conference rooms) and the aim of the working group was to ensure staff representatives have free use of facilities. From the staff side, the ESCWA union representative will co-chair the working group. The terms of reference were yet to be prepared and the staff-side would promote for maximum number staff-side members.

Also, management briefed about the Global Orientation to the United Nations (GO2UN) programme for new or transitioning staff that have just started a new position in the UN. The programme provides learning modules and engagement for quick and effective integration of the newly recruited or transferred staff.

The SMC also discussed the paper on regional diversity. The paper highlighted approaches focused on regional diversity in selections and promotions that some UN Secretariat entities have put in place internally even though there was no General Assembly mandate or Secretariat policy on it, which led to its perceived irregular application in the recruitment process. The staff representatives asked the management side to clarify whether entities have the authority to implement their own internal approaches on regional diversity and what were the implications for implementing such an approach without written guidelines. The management side referred to the UN Charter that states that as broad geographic representation as possible should be promoted and the internal approaches and senior managers' compacts were meant to advance it. It was agreed that the management would deliver a presentation on that topic at the next SMC meeting in September.

For the next SMC meeting, the staff side (union in Vienna) would prepare a paper on the eLUNA evaluation. It would highlight the fact that the previous evaluation commissioned by the management did not follow secretariat policy on evaluations. The management side appears to be reluctant to discuss anything related to DGACM at SMC. The staff representatives plan to send a letter to the SMC President to put the eLUNA evaluation on the agenda of the next SMC meeting and to write to the USG of DGACM regarding engaging all staff representatives (currently the USG of DGACM wishes to only engage NY reps) and to collect staff feedback on eLUNA. Another item to be put on the SMC agenda was the UNRWA dismissed staff. CCISUA had sent a letter to the Secretary-General to raise staff unions' concern on terminating the staff contracts after an internal investigation said the evidence "could" indicate that they "may have" been involved in the attacks of 7 October 2023. The staff side agreed to submit a paper on this issue for the next SMC meeting to discuss this issue with the management. The paper would be prepared by the UNOG SU. Furthermore, UNOG SU was working with Vienna Staff Union to learn more about the MoU put in place by New York DOS that forces staff in certain categories to agree for contract termination if certain conditions weren't met. As a result, a paper could be presented at the next SMC.

A Council member felt that the UN used to be more geographically diverse some years back even in the general service category. Some members highlighted that not all staff were aware of SPA and working at a higher level without compensation was a norm in some entities and urged to share more guidance and references on the issue. Some argued if the question of regional diversity would impede recruitment from underrepresented or unrepresented countries if those countries happen to be from the overrepresented region. It was clarified that geographic diversity was under the GA mandate that covered regular budget posts and the framework did exist, while no specific framework covered the regional diversity issue. However, regional diversity indicators were included in the senior leaders' compacts and allowed entities a lot of discretion and latitude to what degree they would apply it. That situation might lead to an unfair and biased recruitment process when a hiring manager can avoid abiding by regional parity, while in other cases opening a recruitment process several times to ensure diversity of candidates. The issues that staff with multiple nationalities could face were also highlighted.

## **5. UNSMIS townhall**

A townhall with UNSMIS was organized a year ago where staff had the opportunity to ask many questions. Recently, SU leadership had a meeting with the chief of UNSMIS to raise staff concerns mainly on mental health coverage and clarity about the new internal rules. For example, a new internal rule that was supposed to avoid overpayment for surgery needs to be explained more clearly to staff, in order for them to communicate with their surgeons. UNSMIS agreed to the SU proposal on producing a document in English and French that could be shared that would explain the rule in more detail. UNSMIS chief also agreed to organize another townhall this year similar to the previous one where UNSMIS responded directly to staff questions and proposed to organize it on 26 September. Council agreed on the date.

## **6. Update on the Staff Benevolent Fund**

SU leadership had met with the Staff Counsellor to discuss the update of the Fund's statutes. The statutes were not updated for a long time and needed to be revised especially due to evolution of banking practices and the change of signatories of the Fund. Once the changes have been agreed by the SU and the Division of Administration, the updated statutes would be proposed for adoption by all staff members of UNOG at the Ordinary General Assembly that will be convened during the second half of January.

The issue of advertising the Fund as well as addressing eligibility issues were also discussed at the meeting. Questions were raised about the eligibility of OCHA staff and the involvement of non-UNOG Staff Counsellors in reviewing cases for the Fund. It was also noted that whilst the Fund received only very few applications per year, the paperwork was so cumbersome that the Fund did not have sufficient human resource capacity to manage a higher number of applications. Informing staff about the Fund should only happen after eligibility criteria and any changes to the statutes were clarified.

## **7. Medical services**

ES recently met with the medical services to convey staff concerns on, amongst other things, the reasonable accommodation process as this wasn't clear to many staff members. It was agreed that a revision was needed. Another meeting is scheduled to discuss a recent complaint about shortened sick leave for a security staff, and that even though the staff member had a medical certificate issued by an external doctor, the UN medical service reduced the number of days permitted stating that it was according to the international standards. Council members were urged to share any questions by Friday which they would like to be raised during the meeting. A Council member proposed to ask about regular checkups that the staff members had to undergo every two years some time ago but weren't carried out anymore due to reportedly resource shortage and medical services reorientation as an administrative and compliance body and not a provider of medical care. The importance of regular checkups was underlined since it would help in detecting health issues early on and contribute to staff wellbeing. The Council asked that further clarification be obtained from medical services on what services they actually provide.

## **8. CCISUA meetings**

As every year, the CCISUA mid-term meeting would take place in New York from 19 to 22 November with follow up lobbying of Member States from 25 to 27 November. Ian Richards, as the Vice-President for conditions of service, along with Laura Johnson and Janet Puhlovic were proposed to represent the SU at the meeting; while Ian Richards and Laura Johnson were proposed to carry out lobbying joined by

Mohamed Chiraz Bali who had rich experience and connections with the delegates. The decision was adopted by consensus.

## **9. Compensation review**

The General Assembly asked ICSC the previous year to undertake a new review of compensation benefits 8 years after the last one, to see if staff compensation was still fit for purpose. It was noted that there was a high probability that the compensation review would recommend the GA increasing the payments to keep the UN competitive due to global salary increases but also to attract young talent who were no longer necessarily considering the UN as an attractive place to work. Also, some people were less willing to leave their countries than before, which was partly due to work-life balance, but also because of spouse career considerations. The staff side was pushing for changes to make compensation packages such as education grant, childcare for kindergarten in expensive duty stations like Geneva and New York and the field, benefits more competitive.

The Council agreed with the fact that the UN was becoming less attractive because of job security erosion, reducing benefits as well as increasing number of international companies and NGOs with the same level or even higher salaries and benefits. The members agreed to further lobby the ICSC and the SG levels to make the UN more attractive to the best talent to continue its vital work.

## **10. Inter-Agency Games 2024**

This year the Inter-Agency Games would take place from 23 to 27 October in Lloret de Mar, Spain, and the registration had been open. The games were organized by the UN Geneva Staff Sports Commission and SU would provide support by sending out a broadcast to staff and publishing the news on the SU website. As usual, SU would partially subsidize the participation of its dues-paying members in the games.

## **11. SHP report to the General Assembly**

An SHP report was prepared for the General Assembly (GA) where reasons for overspending and the ways to address it were discussed. SU asked the management to have the opportunity to provide comments. Management proposed to have a briefing on the report with the SHP team on Friday, 30 August. SU would use this opportunity to ask again to share the report.

## **12. Update on the ICSC session**

One ICSC meeting was held in summer in Rome. It mostly focused on compensation review that was already presented under point 9 above. In addition, the meeting had discussed age diversity. ICSC had noted that the proportion of older staff was high while the number of young staff was relatively low. While the staff-side admitted that in the past the UN workforce was somewhat younger, they underlined the importance of balancing experience with age. The next ICSC meeting was planned to take place in spring in New York.

The Council also agreed that the focus was shifting to encourage more younger staff, but this shouldn't give rise to ageism where older staff are left behind and not granted promotions.

## **13. Long Service Awards 2024**

The LSA ceremony, organized every year by SU and UNOG HR, would take place on 15 October. The preparation of awardees lists was ongoing. It was agreed that the SU would pay for some snacks and drinks to give staff the opportunity to meet and talk to other colleagues after the ceremony. In this regard, the Council agreed to allocate up to CHF 1,000.

## **14. AOB**

- It was suggested that the Council organize a barbecue at the UN beach and the date to be determined at a later stage. The Council supported the idea.

*The meeting was adjourned at 3:10 p.m.*

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**Acronyms and abbreviations:**

SU: Staff Union of the UNOG

EB: Executive Bureau of the Staff Union

ES: Executive Secretary of the Staff Union

DES: Deputy Executive Secretary of the Staff Union

SMC: Staff-Management Committee

FC: Financial Commission of the Staff Union

CCISUA: Coordinating Committee of International Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System

JNC: Joint Negotiating Committee bringing together the UNOG Staff Union and the UNOG administration

SHP: Strategic Heritage Plan