

Statement by the Union of General Service Staff of FAO and WFP (UGSS) to the Annual Session of the
WFP Executive Board, 21 June 2018

Mister President, Distinguished members of the Executive Board, Mister Executive Director, colleagues of the Professional Staff Association, Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning.

On behalf of the Union of General Service Staff of FAO and WFP, we would like to thank you for granting us the opportunity to address the Board once again. We are grateful for the interest and the support demonstrated to the staff directly through their elected representatives. It is also thanks to your strong support that today WFP can proudly announce some positive developments that took place since last June. We would like to especially mention the Mandatory Age of Separation which has been extended to 65 for all employees, without prejudice to the acquired rights of staff, through a change to the FAO Staff Rules and Regulations, just recently announced. We believe that the support you gave was paramount in the decision to not further delay the implementation.

Turning to the freeze on Headquarters General Service recruitment that began in March 2011, and following the announcement made by Mr. Beasley at the last June Board, we are delighted to inform you that next week around 50 Vacancy Announcements for regular positions will be posted which will be open to temporary staff. Over the coming weeks, further positions will be advertised, for a total of almost 90 positions. In this regard, we would like to thank our senior management and HR for consulting with UGSS and for taking our concerns into consideration.

We acknowledge the enormous effort which will be made by HR in managing the exercise and the following wave of applications that will ensue. We are hopeful that the exercise will be completed by the end of 2018 and that, upon conclusion, it will be possible for HR and UGSS to review the entire selection process for GS staff in HQ, with a view to reinforcing the independence, effectiveness, fairness, consistency, transparency, and accountability, of the recruitment procedures.

Distinguished members of the Board, a year ago we mentioned in our statement that some of the FAO/WFP staff/management joint committees which constitute an essential part of the internal governance of both Organizations (as they issue recommendations to the FAO Executive Head), notably, the Joint Advisory Committee on Medical Coverage (JAC/MC), and the Joint Commissary Committee (JCC), had either not been convened (JAC/MC) or even abolished (JCC).

We regret to report that no progress has been made in this regard. Indeed, the situation has worsened because in 2017 the tender for the provision of health insurance coverage by the three organizations was launched but neither the staff representatives, or even the staff at large, were notified.

Having noted that, we are very happy to inform you that WFP negotiated an addendum to the existing insurance contract with Allianz so as to extend health coverage for consultants and short-term staff. This addendum will cover pregnancy-related medical expenses and delivery, and 16 weeks of paid compensation throughout pregnancy. This is a milestone for WFP temporary staff, and we would like to express all our appreciation to the Executive Director and the colleagues in the Wellness Division who explored further agreements with Allianz, after the main joint contract had been signed.

We are, however, extremely concerned that the Joint Advisory Committee on Medical Coverage has not been convened for more than two years. After FAO Management proposals for changes to the terms of reference (regarding representation of staff and retirees) were rejected by AP in FAO, FFOA and UGSS, FAO Management basically decided to ignore the JAC/MC. This meant that recent increases in premiums and related cost sharing in FAO, as well as the use of the Profit-sharing Account, was decided with no involvement of the JAC/MC. In this regard, it should be noted that no decisions can be made regarding the use of the Profit-Sharing-Account, without consulting the JAC/MC and that UGSS considers the unilateral decisions made by the Director General of the FAO to be illegal. UGSS therefore encourages WFP to insist on the Committee being reconstituted.

On the Commissary, we note that although WFP promptly established an advisory working group, and FAO administration promised to explore an alternative online business model, nothing has yet materialized. The Commissary has been closed for one year and staff regard this as a breach of their privileges.

WFP staff are concerned that the now established hiring practices by WFP management have led to a preponderance of non-contributory employees with no particular adherence to the ethos of WFP social or financial concerns. This may be expedient for WFP in the short-term (often justified ostensibly by the exigencies of emergency work), but creates medium-term problems and will certainly create long-term issues where staff feel that they have little or no control. It is not simply a political issue, but an issue of financial and social stability and of building the core staff for the next generation.

Staff are also concerned over the proposed changes to the structure of the Pension Board where the influence of Specialized Agencies and their participants over the governance of their pensions may be eliminated, with total control by the UN Secretariat. WFP staff, together with those of other Specialized Agencies consider it vital both they and their employing organizations, as joint contributors to the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund, retain a strong voice in decisions that will affect them and that all decisions adhere to a strong ethical standard reflecting the United Nations Code of Conduct. Staff do not want any changes in the current structure of the Pension Board. It has worked very well over the years.

We welcome the emphasis that Mr Guterres, Secretary General of the UN has put on tackling harassment and on whistleblower protection in the UN system. We acknowledge WFP's efforts to revise the HSHAP (Protection from Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Violence, Abuse of Authority, and Discrimination in the Workplace) policy, and we hope that it will follow suit on improving whistleblower protection. We have a strong and cohesive culture in WFP due to the nature of our work and the dedication to our mission. Notwithstanding, this culture may at times translate into misunderstandings as to what is appropriate behavior. We look forward to working with Management this coming year to establish mechanisms that will work for and protect our staff so that they may actually feel supported when they come forward with concerns. We all want to be able to come into work knowing that wrongdoing will be acted against and knowing that those who report such wrongdoings will be protected, and not, as has been too often the case, lose their job or be frozen out. Not only will we work

on this to ensure a respectful and positive environment, we will also do this to keep our staff. For far too long the laissez-faire attitude has also meant that excellent staff resources have left the organization because they saw no alternative to dealing with a painful situation.

To conclude, WFP staff appreciate very much the changes to the Manual Section governing the age of retirement and the extension of medical insurance coverage to short-term staff and the end of the freeze for the hiring of staff in the General Service category. Staff look forward to continuing such positive collaboration with Management on all issues affecting the conditions of work to successfully carry out the mission of WFP.

We thank you for your attention and we take the opportunity to wish you every success in your deliberations.