47th Staff Council Meeting Minutes

The meeting was quorate at 13:25 PM EDT with 22 Units present. The meeting was recorded. Staff Council Chair Mr. Sebastian Cervantes chaired the meeting and Secretary Ms. Kathryn Kuchenbrod took notes. All members of the leadership were present.

1. Adoption of Agenda

The only item on the agenda for this special meeting was discussion of the resolution “COVID-19 pandemic and occupational health and safety issues for United Nations Secretariat personnel in New York”

Agenda was adopted.


Ms. Barbara Tavora Jainchill (Unit 25) stated that a few points needed to be clarified. Some colleagues are asking whether the United Nations can mandate the vaccinations. It currently does when it comes to travel. What is new is the current mandate to report vaccination status. The second question is about a study on occupational health and safety. Stated that it was impractical for the Union to find and commission to do the study. The figure of $5,000 was proposed, but if we can’t find a consultant for this amount, we can address the issue later.

Mr. Patel Noble (Unit 13) stated that the union has yet to respond to the staff regarding the 13 August communication from the Secretary-General. He disagreed that vaccination was mandated for all staff. He questioned whether the union will take a position on mandated vaccination for COVID-19. If staff members don’t want to be vaccinated, will the Union represent those staff members if they have the legal right to abstain from vaccination. In the Department of Safety and Security (DSS), there are a number of staff who are hesitant. He pointed out the lack of consideration for religious objections in the communications from the Administration. Staff members in DSS wrote a stronger open letter to the Under-Secretary-General, who responded by saying that there were political
problems within the Union. Mr. Noble read statement from the Under-Secretary-General outlining the role of the Union in on the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) committee.

Ms. Tavora Jainchill stated that she didn’t agree with Mr. Noble regarding the vaccination mandate. She stated that she saw in writing a statement that the Union should not be complaining because the President is part of the OSH committee. Appreciates that leadership is one the committee. The Council doesn’t need to be there because the President is present on the committee. However, the Union does have a right to complain about the decisions of the administration because the OSH committee only makes recommendations, which may or may not be followed by the Administration. The paragraph in question does not have to remain in the resolution.

Mr. Aitor Arauz Chapman (President) suggested that we review the resolution paragraph by paragraph rather than having a general discussion.

Mr. Stephane Jean (Unit 11) suggested changing the effective date to 7 September in paragraph 3. Mr. Jean included a reference to projections from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in paragraph 4. Ms. Simona Maria Chindea (Unit 23) objected to the inclusion of a hypothesis. It was agreed to remove the clause.

Ms. Chindea asked why the resolution said nothing about staff rights, both under national constitutions and the rules of the Organization, and that rights should be individual. Ms. Tavora Jainchill stated that we have both rights and obligations, and one of the obligations has to do with vaccines.

Mr. Predrag Vasic (Unit 25) stated that we have to work in the best interest for staff. We have to make decision on scientific information, not disinformation, and it’s clear that vaccines work and are effective. The Union can discuss how policies are implemented, but mandates are essential. We are not against the administration on this one. We have to make sure that exceptions are valid.

Mr. Arauz stated that the draft resolution has been on the table for weeks, and there is no way to include reference to human rights. There is precedence for vaccination mandates. It would be better to focus on how that obligation is implemented and find ways to support those who, for whatever reason, don’t want to get vaccinated. If staff members feel that their rights are being violated, the Leadership will help file complaints with the legal bodies.

Regarding paragraph 7, Mr. Jean stated that there is a difference between the guidance on mask-wearing (30 August) of the Office of Human Resources and the World Health Organization. Mr. Noble stated that there needs to be clarification because it is not stated whether staff need to wear a mask on the premises, rather than just indoors.
Mr. Arauz stated that for the purposes of this resolution paragraph 7 just recognizes the guidance, and the specifics of the issues should be spelled out in the operative paragraphs.

Mr. Jean asked for clarification on the clause that was added to paragraph 10. Mr. Arauz stated that there are no rules about how staff data is protected.

Ms. Chindea objected to the mandate because there is no proof of efficacy. Mr. Arauz stated that we can’t continue to have a general discussion, and we need to focus on the text. Ms. Tavora Jainchill stated that the Organization doesn’t need to prove anything about, as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the various national authorities have already done that.

Mr. Jean explained that guidance on 13 August on mask-wearing was consistent with guidance from WHO. The guidance of 30 August was not consistent. Mr. Arauz stated that the subject should be handled in the operative paragraphs.

Mr. Jean stated that he thought we should revert to the guidance of 30 August. Mr. Egor Ovcharenko (Unit 28) stated that there should be a reference in operative paragraph 1 to World Health Organization guidelines. Ms. Gueziel added that should be added to the preambular section. Mr. Jean stated that we need to make sure that work from home is linked to benchmarks so that we can revert to Phase 1, if necessary. Mr. Arauz has stated that the Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH) is monitoring the situation, but they are not communicating it to staff, which is the problem.

Mr. Arauz stated that he had doubts about commissioning the study. With budget and timeline available, it’s doubtful we would get good information. DHMOSH, the Department of Operational Support and the Facilities Management Service are doing these analyses, and it would be better to use the work of the in-house experts. Mr. Jean suggested that a second layer of review on the findings of the in-house data. Mr. Arauz suggested that there should be a second resolution if we decide to go forward to the study because it could be counterproductive to show our hand to the Administration. Ms. Tavora Jainchill suggested asking the Administration to share study results, and if we don’t agree, then we take a second step. It was agreed to replace paragraph 5 with a statement about requesting information regarding health and safety studies for staff welfare and well-being. Ms. Gueziel noted that during the Capital Master Plan, the Union had to commission an air-quality study, as the Administration did not want to share its data, so we may need to hire an expert. Mr. Arauz stated that there are studies on air quality, safe occupancy levels, and others. He suggested asking for the results of relevant studies.

Ms. Chindea requested a paragraph be added requesting that two additional expert staff members be added to the OSH committee.
There was a brief discussion about the issue of non-compliance, but the allotted time for the meeting had elapsed, and it was decided to continue the discussion of the resolution at the Staff Council meeting on 9 September.

*Adjourned at 14:55 EDT.*