47th Staff Council Meeting Minutes

The meeting was quorate at 13:25 EDT with 17 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 agenda was adopted.

2 Adoption of Minutes

The adoption of the minutes for meeting 47/13 was postponed until next week.

3 Reports by units

Mr. Aitor Arauz (President) stated that he had received a petition from the Families of United Nations International School (UNIS) Queens protesting the announced closure of the UNIS campus in Queens. They are looking for support from the United Nations Staff Union. The Council discussed the issue, including the point of view of the families, as well as the involvement of the Staff Union in the past. The number of students has been decreasing over the years, so the Board of UNIS is of the opinion that it is becoming harder to maintain. Mr. Stephane Jean (Unit 11) questioned whether those who made the request were constituents and why we should get involved. Ms. Ellen Alradi (Unit 10) stated that, given the fact that the cost of tuition is out of reach for most staff members and that the proportion of non-UN students at UNIS is so high, we should not be lending our support. The President noted that he had received a lot of communications from parents regarding the fact that the education grant is insufficient to pay for tuition at UNIS. The General Assembly has repeatedly turned down an increase. He stated that there is enough doubt as to whether it is a good idea to support this cause and would rather stay neutral on it. Mr. Francisco Brito (1st Vice President) stated that it was a dues-paying member who approached the Staff Union about the issue. The general consensus was that the Staff Union should stay neutral, however there may be a point in which we need to get involved regarding to staff members’ ability to pay for education.
Ms. Amal Abou Rafeh (Unit 24) stated that a staff member’s seemingly legitimate request to medical services was rejected. The President stated that he put together a document showing the steps the Staff Representatives should go through when a constituent comes for help on an issue such as this.

4 President’s report and summary of communications

Mr. Brito attended the session of the staff selection working group, which has been disappointing because the Administration has been inflexible. The President reported that in this week’s meeting of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) committee there was discussion about how there has been a lot of pressure from civil society and certain Member States to let non-governmental organizations (NGOs) back into the building, so they are looking into ways of doing that. There is no way to control free movement throughout the building, but the President asked the committee to put up specific signage to avoid non-staff wandering around staff areas.

5 Executive Board report

No comments.

6 Finances

Mr. Jaime Garreta (Assistant Treasurer) stated that he nothing to report.

7 Return to Premises / COVID-19 Survey / Next Normal

Mr. Jean recalled that the Council agreed to share the results of the survey in advance of the General Meeting on 11 November. He suggested reconvening to analyse the results of the survey and decide on how they will be presented.

Ms. Alradi raised the issue of the concerns of staff members who work in open workspaces, and those concerns need to be raised with the management. Mr. Garreta raised the issue of day care. One staff member was told that if she didn’t come back to work five days a week in January, she would be marked absent. A lot of staff members have issues with day care centres that are closed or have reduced hours. The Administration is not making an exception for telecommuting for these staff members. Ms. Shirley Abraham (Unit 17) stated that she has heard the threat of “abandonment of post” more frequently. The issue is that the policy is being handled unevenly. She reiterated the problems with the difficulty of trying to arrange day care.
Ms. Kathryn Kuchenbrod (Unit 30) raised the issue of the lifting of the mask mandate, particularly in open workspace.

Mr. Jean, recalling the resolution passed on COVID-19 measures, raised the issue of implementing the resolution in which we asked for the results of air quality studies and so on. He added that there should be regular messaging coming from the Administration to reassure staff members and to be transparent regarding outbreaks and air quality.

The President stated that staff don’t believe that the workplace is safe. The change in the mask mandate is making people uncomfortable. Some concerns are founded, some may not be. It’s not our job to tell people that they should not be worried. The Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH) should be doing more to engage with staff. The other area of concern is for people who don’t want to come or are facing childcare situations. The President sent an email to the Administration, which he will share with the Council. The main point addressed was to inquire why so many medical recommendations being rejected. In the guidance, they do say that managers have the last word, but some managers don’t feel comfortable overriding a determination by Medical Services. Also, it is not in the guidance that staff members should have to make up days missed in the office. Supervisors should not be asking staff to justify why they are taking annual leave on days when they are meant to be in the office. And there is the issue of how staff members with small children, particularly working mothers, are bearing the brunt of these issues. These are the issues for which we need to have clarity from the Administration. He recommended discussing this at the Executive Board meeting or setting up a small committee, and he made a request for volunteers.

Mr. Jean suggested inviting representatives from the Administration, regarding medical issues, air quality, and human resources issues and policy. The President stated that he is not opposed in principle, but it alters the nature of a General Meeting. He suggested organizing a separate townhall. Mr. Jean suggested having a two-part meeting so that we can keep more momentum than with an additional townhall, and that proposal was agreed.

Ms. Alradi reiterated the fear of colleagues regarding of exposure not just to air but also being in close proximity to other colleagues, particular in flexible workspace. She stressed the need to do something with the survey results. She suggested presenting the results of the survey with the Administration before they come to talk with us.

Ms. Abraham asked whether we could force the management’s hand to put something in black and white and be clear so that there is no misinterpretation. There needs to be strict rules about mask wearing.

Ms. Gabriela Conti (Unit 7) stated that abandonment of post is very serious threat, and women are leaving the workforce, some due to childcare issues. She suggested getting UN-Women involved.
The President stated that the survey will provide us with the questions we need to put to the Administration, and they cannot ignore the weight of the comments. The Member States are watching what happens with regard to the budget resolution. We need to get decision makers in a townhall and give them the questions from the survey. Specific questions need to be answered.

8 General Meeting

The President stated that we agreed that we want to keep the meeting as straightforward as possible, so we will keep the administrative part of the meeting as is, and the COVID-19/return to premises will be handled as a townhall meeting with Human Resources, Facilities Management and DHMOSH. Before then, we need to have a good analysis of the survey results and send it to the Administration. Mr. Jean suggested attaching all the resolutions passed so far by the 47th Council to the meeting invitation.

9 AOB

No issues were raised.

Adjourned: 12:45 EDT