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Respecting International Labour Rights at the UN

Dear Secretary-General,

On behalf of the 176 million members of International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), I am writing to express our shock that the United Nations (UN) has chosen not to extend basic labour rights to UN staff, the same rights that are enshrined in the conventions of the UN's own specialized agency, the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Instead, as we understand it, the UN is seeking to unilaterally adopt a policy on labour-management relations that moves away from a hard-fought agreement reached only two years ago favouring good-faith negotiations to a system based on mere consultations - marginalizing staff representatives and their organizations in the process. This move is clearly contrary to the advice of the UN's Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) in 2011 and 2012, which not only recognizes the legality of negotiations, but has consistently advocated for the full and effective promotion of collective bargaining with UN staff. While this would be troubling behavior by any employer, this is especially disconcerting given that the UN is meant to set a positive example for the world's governments, based on respect for fundamental human rights.

Labour-management relations within the UN system have long been in a state of crisis. This previously came to a head in 2011, when major budget cuts were announced without prior consultations with staff representatives about the decision or its effects. The establishment of a new Staff-Management Committee (SMC), meant to strengthen staff management relations and bring the procedures of the UN more into line with those of the UN Charter and ILO Conventions, was a step in the right direction. However, the SMC II, which took place this month in Mexico City, is evidence of an ongoing crisis within the UN.

We understand that one of the central agenda items was proposed changes to the Secretary-General's Bulletin (SGB) which would strip the staff of negotiating rights. Management has claimed that the changes were forced upon them by the General Assembly, though it was management that proposed that the General Assembly take a position on the matter. Further, the General Assembly Resolution only requested that the SGB "be in line with existing staff regulations." From our review, this is already the case. The unions proposed

to management that they jointly approach the General Assembly to explain this, but this proposal was rejected. Instead, management insisted on the proposed changes. Indeed, management informed the staff unions present at the SMC that should no agreement be reached, they would still go ahead and promulgate them. This is in violation of the SGB itself, and calls into question the commitment of your Administration to resolve this ongoing crisis through dialogue. Management brought the entire SMC to an early halt after rejecting every union offer to seek further discussion on the issue.

This serious breakdown leaves open the question as to how to move forward, not only on the question of the changes to the SGB, but also on the important day to day concerns of the staff. In the current context, including the ongoing global review of conditions of service, we would urge a solution be found sooner rather than later.

We trust that this new move away from good-faith negotiation has nothing to do with the so-called “non-paper” which was discussed recently by the High-Level Committee on Management, and which concludes, “Regarding the most desirable extent of participation by Staff Federations, the prevailing view emerging from the consultations was to reduce the current level, and instead conduct dialogue with staff through other designated mechanism(s).” To adopt such an approach would have a serious impact, not only on the confidence of the UN workforce in its management, but also in the moral authority of the United Nations when promoting dialogue among its own Member States.

The UN system cannot treat its staff and their representatives in this way. We urge you to re-establish constructive labour management dialogue in line with internationally labour standards. I would be pleased to discuss this with you, together with staff representatives, at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Banerjee', written in a cursive style.

General Secretary