



Mr António Guterres
Secretary General
United Nations
New York, US

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Dear Mr Guterres,

I am writing on behalf of Public Service International and its international civil servants affiliated organizations.

Some extremely worrying news have been brought to our attention and made us write to you immediately.

Indeed, we have been made aware of the report on the *Future of the United Nations Systems Workforce*, prepared under the guidance of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Director-General Guy Ryder and yourself.

The report contains many alarming features, particularly the section on “agile” contract modality. It speaks of a new model contract supporting “a more agile organization that can rapidly adapt to changing needs and opportunities and scale up and down as needed”. The report notes that these so-called agile contracts could progressively apply to all staff, replacing fixed term and continuing contracts.

Public Services International has already denounced the kind of contracts that lead to precarity and uncertainty within the UN workforce – the survey carried out in 2018 highlighted a high number of professionals based in Geneva, employed full-time for the UN and its agencies under false consultancy contracts, some of whom even lived below the poverty line according to Swiss standards – a situation that was previously raised by two UN Joint Inspection Unit reports of 2012 and 2014.

We are also concerned that these practices – usually restricted to the commercial sphere and limited in many cases by the justice, which considered them inadequate – fall short of basic labour standards and decent working conditions. In addition, they are in contradiction to numerous UN principles and rules underpinning the independence of the international civil service. Indeed, since its creation, the UN has always advocated for the independence of the international civil servants in their activities and work (Standards of Conduct of International Civil Servants; ILO constitution, Article 9; UN Charter, Article 101) and this independence should be guaranteed by employment stability.

The UN Staff Federations have already expressed their concern about this situation. It follows a [previous issue](#) concerning appointments of limited duration, under which staff received a fixed amount with no additions for post adjustment, dependency or education allowance, and no salary scale to ensure equal pay by gender (Interestingly, your predecessor, Mr. Ban Ki-moon abolished them because they were seen as contrary to fair labour practices).

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The rationale for the plan devised in the report is that the UN needs to have greater agility and responsiveness in dealing with challenges and world events and deliver this in the context of funding constraints and a downturn in the global economy. However, this assumption is not supported by factual evidence or empirical assessment, and the solutions proposed in the document fail to appreciate the critical importance of the established contracts that form the relationship between staff, employer, constituents and the people benefiting from UN action. It also fails to protect the new generation of staff who deserve proper contracts.

As the United Nations celebrates its 75th anniversary, we call on you to review the current contractual modalities that give the UN the agility it is seeking. This is essential in order to preserve the human and labour rights of UN staff and guarantee job security. We urge you to find a better solution to the issues arising from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing security and reassurance to UN staff instead of treating them in the same way big tech treat workers of the *gig economy*. The UN is not a place for the commercial “solutions” such as zero-hours contracts or similar, under the guise of “flexible working arrangements”. Job insecurity is never a solution, particularly in a UN context where the independence of activities is at the heart of its mandate.

Yours faithfully,



Rosa Pavanelli
Secretary General

cc.

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