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FOURTEENTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Report of the Working Party on the Functioning of the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference

Oral report of the Chairperson of the Working Party

1. The Working Party on the Functioning of the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference (WP/GBC) met on the afternoon of Thursday, 5 November 2015. As Chairperson of the Governing Body, I presided over the meetings, while the Employer and Worker Vice-Chairpersons of the Governing Body, Mr Rønnest and Mr Cortebeeck, were Employer and Worker spokespersons, respectively. The Office had prepared a document¹ for the Working Party, following tripartite consultations held on 18 September 2015. I asked delegates firstly to make an appreciation of the experience, trialled in June 2015, of holding a two-week Conference, and secondly to consider improvements or adjustments that might be made to increase efficiency further. In line with the usual procedure for this Working Party, its Government members spoke first, after which the spokespersons of the Employers' and Workers' groups made their comments.

Improving the functioning of the International Labour Conference

2. Governments welcomed the document prepared for the Working Party and expressed broad appreciation of the two-week format of the Conference that had been trialled in 2015. More improvement was possible, but certain changes had worked well: the shorter opening sitting; the information circulated prior to the Conference; the system for pre-registration in committees; strict respect for time management had resulted in few night sittings; information technology devices had worked well in committees and further improved use of technology could speed up communication; consideration should be given to the possibility of online consultation. Security levels had been satisfactory. Appreciation was also expressed for the multiple consultation system used to advance the reform. There

¹ GB.325/WP/GBC/1.

was general satisfaction at the correct functioning of the Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS), however it was important that the list of cases should be made available early, and the informal tripartite Working Group on the Working Methods of the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards should meet during the Governing Body's session in March 2016. The World of Work Summit had functioned well, but should be more interactive. The special sittings should take place on one day, with one coming just before the lunch break.

3. Some governments called for more interpretation services at group meetings, and wished to hold these meetings earlier in the morning. There was also a call to avoid weekend work and night sittings, and concern was expressed at working on the Sunday prior to the Monday opening of the Conference; rather, the event could begin on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Further consultations should be held before going ahead with the proposed questionnaire for the preparation of general discussion items: ubiquitous questionnaires led quickly to "questionnaire fatigue". Final decisions on the Conference agenda should take account of preparation time, especially for standard-setting items. Several governments made the point that texts should be completed by drafting committees at least 24 hours before they came before the plenary for vote, while conclusions should be shorter and more focused. The proposal to hold committee panel discussions to share national or regional experiences was interesting, but these should precede the committee's work, not follow it. A suggestion was made to limit speaking time in technical committees to three minutes for delegates and five for groups, but all delegates should be able to take the floor and participate; time should also be made available for the submission process of amendments. The Director-General's Report should be published in early May. It was also pointed out that the Conference was the ILO's supreme decision-making organ, and should be given the time needed to build consensus and complete its work effectively. The Africa group submitted an amendment to the decision paragraph in this connection, suggesting that rather than fixing the duration of the Conference immutably at two weeks, the duration should be adjusted depending on the importance of the agenda. Several speakers stressed that reform was a participatory process, involving both constituents and ILO staff. Moreover, it was ongoing and evolving: the constituents should always be able to propose improvements.
4. The Employers' group approved the report submitted by the Office. The two-week Conference had been a success, and both political and practical difficulties had been overcome. It was already more efficient and relevant in the new format. The group agreed with the areas for future improvement identified in the Office report and approved the early identification and briefing of committee chairs. The Office should prepare shorter reports, and conclusions should be neutral, concise, balanced and based only on the actual discussions in the committee. The World of Work Summit should be more interactive. The Conference should end on the Friday, rather than continue to Saturday.
5. The Workers' group agreed that the two-week 2015 Conference had gone well, though the workload for constituents and ILO staff had been heavier than the document suggested. The standard-setting committee had held its second discussion successfully, but second discussions were habitually easier than first. The Office should make a comparative cost analysis of the old/new Conference format. The group would try to identify its committee spokespersons early, but these appointments were only finalized by the full group meeting before the Conference. The 2015 arrangements for group meetings with interpretation on the opening day should be maintained. Governments should agree to meet on the prior Sunday: opening the Conference mid-week would simply be a return to past practice. The empty plenary hall would be remedied by governments allocating delegates to follow the debates in plenary and in the committees fully; thought should be given to resolving the anti-climax of the report adoption procedure, where attendance was scant. The CAS had worked under considerable pressure, with a number of night sittings, but the group was not

open to a reduction in the substantive work of the Committee. If its report were presented in plenary on the Friday, this would necessitate making the first Saturday a full, rather than a half, working day. The Credentials Committee should be allocated more staff to cope with its workload, rather than reducing time limits for submission of complaints. The group also opposed the notion of irreceivability of complaints based on insufficient evidence. The Office should explore ways to introduce restricted access to some documents through password protection of committee websites. It should find time in the schedule to maintain the Conference Drafting Committee for standard-setting committees.

6. On the way forward, the group felt that the 2016 evaluation of the Social Justice Declaration would provide an opportunity to explore possibilities for the recurrent items. Lessons could also be drawn from the discussion on global supply chains. The group could agree to a simplified questionnaire procedure to prepare general discussion reports, but this should not prevent the Office from providing in-depth analytical reports for such items. In respect of the in-session processes put forward in the Office report, the group suggested some adjustments: the proposed chairperson's summary at the close of each sitting would be better given at the beginning of the first sitting on the following day; drafting groups would be obliged to work on both the Saturday and the Sunday. The two proposals for work in the second week were not incompatible and might be combined. The group submitted an amendment to the point for decision, the sense of which was to delay fixing the length of the Conference immediately at two weeks, but to review the format in November 2016 following a second trial in June 2016.
7. Neither amendment put forward encountered full support from the Working Party, though there was understanding of the desire to make the definitive change to a two-week format more gradual. The Workers' group clarified that they were not against the two-week format of the Conference, they simply wished for time to make a further evaluation and review.
8. The ILO Deputy Director-General for Management and Reform then responded to the points raised during the discussions. He explained that the point for decision fixing the Conference duration had been drafted for logistical purposes to give as much certainty to Conference planning as possible. Constrictions such as fitting the dates of the Conference in between other major meetings taking place in Geneva during the same period would make it difficult to vary the length of the event from one year to the next. This difficulty was compounded by competition for a limited pool of interpreters. He informed the Working Party that initial calculations pointed to a saving of just over US\$570,000 compared to previous Conferences, an 8 per cent reduction in cost. Avoidance of weekend work would be problematic, unless the agenda was reduced. The suggestion to hold panel discussions at the beginning of committees' work was not possible, as the only space in the committees' timetables was during the time that their drafting committees were meeting.
9. I then suggested that the members should consult informally, to enable the Working Party to put forward a good proposal to the Governing Body on Thursday, 12 November. Following these consultations, the Working Party wishes to propose the following draft decision to the Governing Body.

Draft decision

10. *In light of the discussion held on the trial of a two-week session in June 2015 and on possible improvements to be implemented at future sessions of the Conference, the Working Party on the Functioning of the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference recommends to the Governing Body:*

- (a) to confirm the two-week duration for future sessions of the International Labour Conference;*
- (b) to request the Office to prepare for the 326th Session (March 2016) of the Governing Body a detailed plan of work for the 105th Session (June 2016) of the Conference, based on a two-week format;*
- (c) to request the Office to undertake a comprehensive review of the Standing Orders of the Conference with a view to submit to the 328th Session (November 2016) draft amendments to the Standing Orders to the International Labour Conference;*
- (d) to request the Office to prepare for the 328th Session (November 2016) of the Governing Body an analysis of the session in June 2016, which would allow the Governing Body to draw lessons from this experience and take the appropriate decisions as regards the arrangements for future sessions of the International Labour Conference.*