Those blasted retirees!

Should retired staff interpreters keep on working? Let's look at three distinct aspects to the question: legal, ethical and existential.

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As an imminent retiree after upwards of thirty years at the UN, I am most interested by the fact that the subject of working as a pensioner has acquired stark actuality. I submit that there are at least three distinct aspects to it that are better discussed separately: legal, ethical and what for want of a better word I’d call existential.

Legal

The first aspect is easily disposed of: At least for the nonce, there are no legal impediments for a retiree to work as much as he likes or can. Whether there ought to be is a matter that falls under the next two aspects.

Ethical

Here, several facts are, I submit, relevant. First and foremost is the existence of a fixed income.

1. Once past sixty (and for staff recruited after 1 January 1980 or so, past sixty-two), a staff interpreter does not choose to retire: he is most unceremoniously shown the door.
2. A few - myself included - retire at the P-5 level after thirty years of service, but not many.
3. Some - again, myself included - benefit from comfortable pensions; others may retire on a couple of thousand euros.
4. It would be obviously both unfair and ridiculous to assert that anybody who has a pension, no matter how meagre, must stop working.
5. We would not be talking then about pensions per se, but of pensions over and above a certain threshold.
6. But then, why should this threshold be limited to income from pensions? Why not lump together fortunate retirees, consorts of wealthy spouses, colleagues who make an extra buck or two on the side as translators or making real-estate deals, etc.?
7. If (biiiiig if!) the ethical problem is making more money than one presumably “needs” or “deserves” (and I would not presume to tell a colleague how much money he needs, although in a few cases I could definitely come up with a figure on what he realistically deserves), why single out retirees?
8. As pointed out, retirees from international organisations do not “choose” to have a pension: it is mandatory – and it is not free: it has cost all of us a hefty chunk every single month of every single year of our career.
9. On the other hand, it is freelancers who can “choose” not to have a pension: There is no reason why they should not have put aside into a pension scheme the same amount of money that organisations withhold from their staff.

10. When I was a P-3 interpreter all my freelance colleagues my own age were making twice as much as I - whilst working half the time and travelling all over the world. Those who did not plan for the future ought to blame themselves and not their staff colleagues.

Second is the fact that younger people need access to the market. It is not only retirees who prevent younger colleagues from entering the market: Anybody over sixty or sixty-five is effectively working in lieu of a younger colleague.

Third is an interpreter’s contribution to AIIC and the profession. Staff interpreter who have been members of AIIC have contributed a hefty amount to our association, whereas many freelancers have benefited all these years from the working conditions that these staff members who had nothing whatsoever to gain from it, helped negotiate - except that these free riders have not paid a penny. That, I submit, is more than a tad unethical. Yet I do not hear any voices bewailing the fact.

In other words, if it is unethical to work when one does not really need to, then both retirees and non-retirees fall on either side of the divide. If, on the other hand, it is unethical to work past a certain age, then having a pension or not is by the bye.

Existential

And so we come to the existential aspect. Here, each of us has his own story to tell, so let me stick to mine.

As many other retirees (but, indeed, not all older professionals whether benefiting from a pension or not) I feel that I am in the prime of my professional life: Why should I stop setting my feet in a booth while others go on working well into their eighties? I’d love to start teaching. (Is that OK for a retiree? Why? Why not?) How can one effectively teach a metier that one no longer practices? I’d love to do new meetings on new subjects with new colleagues in new markets. Why should I be prevented from it? Many of the colleagues of my generation have a lot to teach younger colleagues. Why should they be deprived of our wisdom? Many of us have a lot to gain from interacting with the youth. Why deprive us of such contacts? Then, I do hope I can still make it to be in the same team with Wadi Keiser. How could I unless both he and I went on working? Last but not least, I hope to be able to help our next negotiation delegation. As a former “one of them”, there are quite a few insights that I could give us.

Even so, it is still a fact that many excellent young colleagues need and deserve a break that is becoming increasingly difficult to find. There are simply so many of us today! I submit, however, that it is the too old and the not too good who should step graciously aside – and they outnumber retirees ten to one! That is something I have no control over, of course, but I do remain keenly aware of the fact that the market is saturated and that young colleagues are the main victims. I do hope that all my other colleagues who can look back on long careers or hefty bank accounts are equally aware.

May I conclude by stating that if AIIC were to decide that its members who benefit from a pension must not work, I’d be the first to disagree with the decision and to abide by it – while all those retirees who never did anything for the association go on working, of course! As would those freelancers who complain so much about retirees but would not think of paying dues.

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