Why should staff interpreters become members of AIIC?

Sergio Viaggio considers why many staff interpreters don’t choose to join AIIC – perhaps it’s a lack of professional conscience

The question is ill-posed: it should simply read "why should interpreters be members of AIIC?", except that, not altogether surprisingly, interpreters still think and act as if a huge divide separated them: there’s freelancers and there’s "permanents"[1]. Freelancers are at the mercy of recruiters and the market, whilst "permanents" lead presumably happy existences married as they are, willy if mostly nilly, to their rich institutional spouses. Staff interpreters are members of their respective staff unions and their financial and related claims mingle with those of their co-workers – freelancers are on their own.

Professional working conditions

Yet, it is obvious that, when working in the booth – in other words, when actually practising the profession – both staff and freelance interpreters have a lot to worry about together, namely, working conditions. When it comes to uphold them, staff interpreters cannot realistically count on their institutional co-workers: the professional working conditions of interpreters – including, naturally, their very workload- can only be successfully addressed by interpreters[2]. And this is what a professional association of interpreters ought to have as its primary aim.

Salary cannot but be based on collective bargaining: there, staff and freelance interpreters play in different – if by no means opposed – teams. Working conditions should not.

And here, interpreters either stand or fall together. Or, rather, either staff interpreters stand together with their freelance colleagues or they risk falling alone. At least as far as the United Nations system is concerned, other than the "seven, exceptionally eight, meetings of some three hours’ duration," maximum workload (based on an independent and surely obsolete medical study), documents dealing with working conditions do not say an iota about booth specifications, full view of speakers and listeners, reduced hours or increased manning strength for difficult technical meetings, documentation, etc.

It is freelancers – or, rather, freelancer members of AIIC – who have ferreted these conditions out of international recruiters – let alone the two-and-a-half to three-hour meetings that the AIIC/CCAQ agreement specifies instead of the "approximately" three hours allowed for in the staff interpreters’ job description.
True, at some duty stations, freelance interpreters working for the UN system must put up with substandard, ill-placed booths, and meetings extended beyond the three-hour limit. If this is so, I submit, it is because their permanent colleagues have not been able duly to influence – let alone dictate – truly professional conditions (freelancers come and go, and those who become fed up never come back – staff interpreters mostly stay). In their fight to improve professional – and not only financial – working conditions, staff interpreters have a lot to gain from becoming members of the one professional organisation that is bent on doing precisely that.

Financial conditions at stake

But, in the long run, financial conditions are also jointly at stake. True, whatever the break that freelancers may get from the UN, salaries within the Organisation are not going to improve for interpreters alone. The same, I suspect, applies to all other institutions hiring both staff and freelance practitioners.

But a harder bargain from freelancers, negotiated from the position of enhanced strength that effectively representing the whole profession undoubtedly gives, would be a strong influence to push actual remuneration for staff interpreters up, for instance, by accelerating chances of promotion or increasing the initial grade at which they are recruited [3]. This, in turn, would probably benefit the institutions’ staff at large – ultimately, the interests of those who live by selling their ability to work cannot but coincide.

Why bother?

All of this, I think, should be crystal-clear to any professional. Why then do so many staff interpreters actively refuse to become members of their one international professional organisation – the one, to boot, that negotiates with their own employers on behalf of the profession as a whole? My guess is that – as do many freelancers who also actively refuse to join – they see AIIC as a union of sorts, strictly interested in salary, travel and other financial or para-financial conditions.

Since here AIIC indeed has little to contribute to the welfare of staff interpreters (if not, as I hope to have proved, all that little), why should a, say, UN staff interpreter part with those inordinately high dues? The rhetorical question is practically answered as well by those, unfortunately numerous, freelancers (I am tempted to call then free-riders yet again) who figure that AIIC will negotiate on their behalf equally well if they spend those monies on themselves: insofar as there is enough of a critical mass of suckers to pay up and keep the Association running and reasonably strong… why bother?

The bottom line: money

In other words, I have come to think that the reason most staff interpreters (especially those who had little experience as freelancers before they were recruited by their organisation) do not deign to be part of the effort to uphold the profession is exactly the same why so many freelance colleagues keep their own distance: money!

Some think AIIC cannot relevantly influence their life – others that it will do so anyway, whether they pay or not.

A shame indeed, but an all too real one. Because, to my mind, our Association has two main problems: The lesser one is those who are in and ought to be out. The greater one is those many, way too many, who are out and ought to be in.
Professional conscience

Does this mean that those staff and freelance colleagues are simply unprofessionally selfish? By no means. In the vast majority of cases, it is not a matter of misperceived self-interest, but of a lack of awareness of what the profession – any profession – is about.

Marx spoke of the working class unto itself as opposed to the working class for itself. The latter is the one that has become fully aware of its place in the production system and of its legitimate claims and the best way to pursue them.

The real issue, then, is a lack of "professional conscience" among the profession at large – what with the grey market and all the other niceties that beset it from within[4].

The battle for the conscience of the mass of practitioners – even if only of practitioners of conference interpreting working for the agreement sector – is one of the major setbacks of the association: We are still a minority – if a militantly committed one.

But that is a different kettle of fish – or is it?

Notes

[1] There is a second divide as well, between freelancers who work mainly for international institutions and those -most particularly those with no "international" languages or domiciled far away from the institutional centres, i.e., the Third World- whose main activity is in the private market. These colleagues tend to see AIIC as representing and catering more or less exclusively to their colleagues who do. Since, despite its strenuous efforts, our Association became eventually unable to uphold its original position re professional domicile and fees outside the institutional framework, these colleagues have much less of an incentive to join.

[2] As a matter of fact, most co-workers feel that interpreters have an unfairly lenient deal and, I suspect, would be loath to fight too hard to defend it – at least in the U.N system.

[3] As a matter of fact, the upgrading of interpreter posts over the years (roughly a quarter of all U.N interpreters are at the top P-5 level — something unique, as I understand it, among professional staff) has gone hand in hand with the increase in freelancer's pay. It is moot, I submit, to argue about which is the chicken and which the egg: The net result is that communicating vases are there and improvements on one end tend to give rise to improvements in the other.

[4] From within indeed, and by no means from without: Many (but I would assume, by no means the majority) grey-market practitioners are as good as many of us AIIC members or better (and a few of us are worse than many of them).

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