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## Hunger strike at Unesco (The Guardian)

The UN body's new broom has whipped up a storm, but remains set on his reforms

Jon Henley in Paris  
Saturday January 15, 2000

Unesco's new director-general has embarked on the Herculean task of reforming the bloated and notoriously inefficient body he inherited from his predecessor - and not everyone seems to appreciate his efforts.

Two employees at the UN's much-criticised educational, scientific and cultural organisation have gone on hunger strike in protest at the alleged heavy-handedness of Koichiro Matsuura, the Japanese career diplomat confirmed as director-general last November.

"When people try to restore order there is a real chance you get authoritarian rule, not to say dictatorial rule," said one of the hunger strikers, Bruno de Padirac. "Let us say that Matsuura's time in office has not started well."

Mr De Padirac is one of 71 people promoted by the former director-general, Federico Mayor, in the final month of his mandate. Mr Mayor also made 27 new appointments in the same period, most of them - like the promotions - in breach of Unesco's rules, at a cost of \$11.8m (£7.4m) to its \$800m total biennial budget.

Mr Matsuura, who has vowed to transform Unesco into an efficient and transparent organisation, has suspended all of Mr Mayor's last-minute promotions and appointments, including Mr De Padirac's, pending an examination by a task force.

The second hunger striker, Brenda Runghen, a Canadian, is among 16 employees whose temporary contracts were not renewed.

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A devastating independent audit obtained by the Guardian last year said that nearly half of Unesco's appointments and promotions - many the result of crude nepotism - did not come anywhere near meeting the organisation's own criteria for fair and open competition.

It condemned the UN body's practice of appointing legions of ill-defined consultants and special advisers, and said that many Unesco activities were inadequately planned and insufficiently monitored. It highlighted numerous examples of incompetence and mismanagement within its secretariat.

In an interview, Mr Matsuura defended his reforms and said he had expected that some of his moves would be unpopular.

"Unesco's internal oversight has not been strong. The organisation has to have guidelines, and they have to be observed," he said. "It is inevitable that some people who are adversely affected will criticise me."

Among his other early moves, Mr Matsuura said that he had terminated the contracts of 20 special advisers and senior special advisers who were hired by Mr Mayor.

"I targeted them because they formed a small circle of advisers around the director general who were taking decisions that should have been taken by the full secretariat," he said.

He has also asked for a full audit of one of Unesco's most controversial funds, the \$40m Participation Programme, and removed the programme's director. Mr Matsuura said that Unesco programmes, often criticised as vague, utopian and wasteful, should be concentrated in those areas where the organisation had a strong advantage compared to other international bodies.

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"We have to think very hard to have better coordination, to avoid duplication," he said. "Our activities have been far too thinly spread."

He said the organisation's priority areas under his administration would be basic education, particularly literacy programmes, science and ethics, and, in the age of the internet, communication and ethics.

"We organise big international conferences and adopt big, important declarations, and then sit back," he said. "That's not enough. There must be a properly organised follow-up to ensure something actually gets done. Unesco tends to place more emphasis on organisation than implementation."

He was particularly critical of one of Mr Mayor's pet projects, the vast and ill-defined Culture for Peace programme. "Talking in general terms about a culture of peace is not enough," he said.

"We have to move on to concrete action. For example, taking the lead in organising dialogue on political issues that could lead to greater cooperation in the political arena. It's no good just saying, 'Peace is good, we need a culture of peace.' Everyone knows that already."

Despite staff protests, Mr Matsuura said that he intended to carry out his reforms with the cooperation of the 2,500 employees at Unesco's headquarters. The organisation's information director, Helene Gosselin, said it was "sad that two individuals should take such an extreme step without exhausting all the negotiating possibilities".

In a letter to the staff yesterday, Mr Matsuura appealed to reason, saying that while all periods of transition generated anxiety, it was imperative that Unesco "rubbed out the debts of the past".

He said that he regretted the "totally

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irresponsible attitude" of the two hunger strikers, and described their claim to be defending justice and democracy as fallacious.

From interview  
with Matsuura  
in  
Guardian

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