



**Tribute to Pekka Aro
by Juan Somavia, Director-General
of the International Labour Office
(Geneva, 10 April 2003)**

Dear Ritva, Eemeli, Pilvi, Oskari,
Dear colleagues, distinguished guests,

Thank you for wanting to be here. Thank you also to those in the field — some linked by videoconference — others, for whom this ceremony is being taped, not least our colleagues in Beijing.

We come together in great mourning and sadness. This loss has hit us hard as individuals, as an ILO family. The flag is lowered in all of our hearts.

But as we grieve, we honour. We remember. We pay tribute to the life of our fallen friend Pekka.

It's hard to find the words in this difficult time. But, I think, at this moment, Pekka would have wanted us to remember his smile. His energy. His laughter. The twinkle in his eye. And our memories together.

I remember Pekka Aro on stage. After my arrival at the ILO, we decided to have an annual party and talent show. Pekka was at the heart of it.

He and Barbara Murray were the masters of ceremonies as the staff sang and danced and performed. And as the staff showed their talents — Pekka revealed his own. Uniting people. Bringing out the best in them. Building things that were not there before. Savouring life. That was Pekka Aro.

The other day, Ritva and I were talking about his role as emcee and she said, "But, of course, Pekka was an actor."

And then I came to learn about his first time on stage here in Geneva. He played the lead role in Chekhov's "The Bear". I am told, he was an excellent bear. But there is more to the story. The actor playing the Bear had fallen ill, so Pekka stepped in at the last minute. It was his first time on stage. He took on a difficult role, with little time, and put it all together, and made sure the production was a success. Typical Pekka.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. He was a union lawyer. He was a negotiator. Any good negotiator, any good lawyer is inevitably a bit of an actor. But whether it was acting on stage or taking action on the job, Pekka performed with all his heart.

He was a man of many talents and contrasts — and he blended it all well. He was a lawyer who understood economics. He was an organizer who understood policy. He was an idealist who was grounded in the practical. He was a hard worker who loved to laugh.

And he was pragmatic. He was a Finn, after all. He saw the big picture but what interested him was making sure the Organization was in place to deliver.

He would look at a challenge and say: “We have to get it done so how do we do it?” And he got things organized. And he got results.

In the 1980s, immediately after the Bhopal disaster, it was Pekka who led the trade union team to India; who organized the best health and safety experts; who put together the report and recommendations that ultimately led to the ILO Convention on Major Industrial Accidents.

In the nineties, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was Pekka who served in Budapest for the ILO; who established contacts with trade unions around the region; who helped both the new and reformed unions build democratic structures and learn how to operate in the market economy.

And as we entered a new century, it was Pekka here in Geneva, who was at the heart of the employment sector; who led the Skills team in developing new ways to give people hope and opportunity; and who became a main actor in our new relationship with China. Together with Göran, he had planned the China Employment Forum with his characteristic precision.

Just six weeks ago, I spent a couple of hours in Pekka’s office with his team as they reviewed their work — their vision — their plans for the future. It was a wonderful presentation of a team in action.

Pekka knew how to make things happen.

And his loss is being felt far and wide. We have received numerous messages of condolence from all over the world — a testament to the many lives touched by Pekka.

But as significant and meaningful as all of this is, there was another job that was far more important: husband to Ritva and father to Eemeli, Pilvi and Oskari. To the Aro family, on behalf of us all, I say thank you for sharing Pekka with us.

When we met on Monday, we talked about how much family meant to Pekka. Ritva said Pekka knew life wasn’t always easy. Above all, he wanted to make sure that the children could face hardships or heartbreaks with strength and confidence and hope.

Later, one of Pekka’s children looked up and smiled and said: “My father lived a full life.”

May we all be so blessed.