

After Louette's PR Blitz, Time for a Staff Referendum!



Basking in a wave of favourable media coverage provided by a few obliging journalists, CEO Pierre Louette has decided to extend his public relations offensive by touring the Paris HQ to to push his plan to change AFP's statutes. A reform proposal which is far from enjoying unanimous support, and which is also less and less under his control.

His Master's Voice

The story so far:

- **2006:** Questioned on video by the blogger Loïc Le Meur, Louette is full of praise for AFP's 1957 statutes: *"What's good is that nobody can say they own the agency. The agency has no capital. It is truly not in anybody's hands. That's an extra guarantee of independence. It's written into the agency's founding constitution. That give us this ability to be independent, to raise whatever we want to raise, all the time."*¹
- **December 2007:** In an interview with the French radio station BFM, M. Louette says he plans to *"draft changes to the statutes"* within five years *"to give the agency the means to push through its development, perhaps with a very solid shareholder yet to be selected, and maybe within a European framework."*² Exactly what had happened to cause such a change of direction? The so-called "multimedia revolution"? Internet? The breakdown of the news media's business model? None of those events can be precisely dated to between 2006 and 2007. A wild guess: could our CEO's change of tack be in some way linked to the French presidential election of May 2007?
- **Late 2008:** Bingo: we guessed right! The mission laid down in a letter to M. Louette from the ministers of finance, culture and the budget (respectively Christine Lagarde, Christine Albanel and Eric Woerth) confirms that **AFP's current CEO is seen as being directly under the orders of the state.** *"We want you to submit to us proposals aimed at modernising the agency's statutes and governance... Your proposals are to be submitted by March 31, 2009 at the latest,"* the document states.³ Instead of denouncing this unprecedented act of interference by the French government in AFP's affairs, M. Louette simply does his master's bidding by signing the 2009-2013 Aims and Means Contract (COM) with the state, which refers explicitly to the plans to change AFP's statutes. Obedient to the point of punctiliousness, he also carries out his *"mission"* by handing in his conclusions right on time at the end of March 2009.⁵

The Machine Gathers Speed

- **2009:** Thanks to the worldwide economic and financial crisis, privatisation projects are no longer the order of the day. For the French Post Office, as for AFP, the government dreams up a new strategy, which consists of removing the obstacles to a future privatisation by first turning both firms into joint-stock entities funded by the state. When M. Louette announces this plan, the unions condemn it as a recipe for turning AFP into a state news agency. *"Not at all!"*, shoots back the CEO, brandishing the *"guarantees"* included in his plan, such as the retention of Article 2 from the current statutes⁶, the introduction of an editorial charter, the transformation of the current Higher Council watchdog body into a foundation with increased powers, and the definition of general interest missions for the agency. And then all of a sudden, in the space of two weeks, the CEO's fine words are shown to be hollow.
- **September 2, 2009:** M. Louette reacts to an article in the Germany daily Süddeutsche Zeitung which had asserted that his plan would turn AFP into *"a state news agency"*. Far from it, the CEO states: *"On the board, media clients will enjoy a large majority, as is the case today."*
- **September 17, 2009:** Performing a sudden about-face, the CEO says the exact opposite, during a Works Committee meeting that takes place against the backdrop of a staff work stoppage.⁸ The plan now involves cutting the historic structural link between the agency and French newspaper groups, which will no longer be directly represented on the board. The new AFP will have an owner, and that owner will be the state, via either the Caisse des Dépôts bank (CDC) or the State Holdings Agency

¹ See Rue89 (in French): <http://www.rue89.com/2009/10/16/afp-chronique-dun-pataques-politique-annonce>

² <http://sudaftp.zeblog.com/277091-le-pdg-envisage-une-evolution-du-statut-de-l-39-afp/>

³ Mission statement (in French): <http://www.blog4ever.com/blogfichiers/146783/fics/146783091106110202.pdf>

⁴ ibidem, page 2

⁵ An English version of the Louette report will soon be available at <http://www.afp-privatisee-non-merci.org/>

⁶ For translated extracts from the statutes, see http://www.afp-privatisee-non-merci.org/en/1957_statutes

⁷ <http://www.afp.com/afpcom/de/content/news/zum-artikel-ein-staat> (in German)

⁸ <http://sudaftp.zeblog.com/418004-appel-a-la-greve-le-17-septembre-cgt-snj-fo-sud-afp/>

(APE). Of the planned nine board members, the government will pick three directly and will choose three others among candidates put forward by the Foundation.⁹

Pushing On Regardless

M. Louette is no longer master of either the content of his plan or when it will be implemented. And even if he might have convinced himself early this year that a majority of AFP staff had been influenced by his arguments on the theme of "modernity" and therefore supported his project, the past few months have shown such hopes to be vain. The SOS-AFP petition launched by the unions (www.sos-afp.org), has garnered over 20,000 signatures; staff have mobilised around the unions to demand the "withdrawal" of the Louette plan¹⁰, while the AFP Society of Journalists' (SdJ, a non-union body) has also expressed "concern about the consequences of 'state control' (étatisation)"¹¹ ...

Only Culture Minister Frédéric Mitterrand can still believe – or feign to believe – that there is "convergence between management and the unions on a certain number of points" as he testified to the French Senate in late October.¹²

As for the movement of industrial unrest on the issue of insecure labour contracts at AFP, which had been brewing for months before breaking out with spectacular spontaneity in October, it will have served to show that under present management, **AFP's modernisation goes hand in hand with increasing labour insecurity**. And that goes for the very services which are seen as key to the company's development. They can only keep going thanks to the essential role played by journalists working under "precarious" conditions: on freelance and short-term contracts in the video sector, and under local status in the various multimedia operations.¹³

During his promotional tour of AFP's editorial services, Pierre Louette will no doubt argue once again that with a change to its statutes the agency will gain access to funds to facilitate its development, and to allow it to hire young people. But he will not be able to hide the fact that those promises are totally at odds with the practices which he himself has allowed to develop, and with his own strategic options. In particular:

- Far from calling for job creation, the agency's aims and means contract (COM) for 2009-2013 in fact demands cuts, notably among journalistic staff.¹⁴
- The CEO's plan calls for "the share of income provided by the state (today at around 40% of total turnover) to fall to 30% by 2013", by promoting "external growth", diversification via "satellite" activities, the setting-up of new subsidiaries and the acquisition of companies producing content and/or technologies. In other words, by creating yet more insecure jobs for staff who will enjoy little or no rights.¹⁵

Neither will M. Louette be able to gloss over his own failures in the very types of "high-tech" products that are supposed to provide AFP with a new business model under his plan. Like for example the San Francisco-based subsidiary Newzweg and its "Deadline" news quiz, discreetly withdrawn last June from the Facebook social networking site, where it had completely failed to take off. The initial cost of that project is believed to have been at least 500,000 euros.¹⁶

For a Staff Referendum!

Having turned a deaf ear to the arguments put forward by the trade unions, the CEO is now trying to go behind their backs by appealing directly to journalists in the various Paris-based services in his capacity as head of the company. Such gatherings fall totally outside normal democratic union-management dialogue, which is supposed to take place on a level playing-field.

So it is up to us to give life to democratic procedures within the company! In September, the Society of Journalists (SdJ) demanded that the plan to change AFP's statutes be submitted to a staff referendum, as was the case in 1956 when the current dispensation was adopted by the French parliament.¹⁷

SUD proposes that the joint unions organise such a vote as soon as possible - before Christmas 2009 - by asking a simple and unambiguous question: **"Are you in favour of AFP being turned into a publicly-funded joint-stock company?"**

⁹ Cf. <http://sudafp.zeblog.com/418216-amplifier-l-39-opposition-au-plan-louette/>

¹⁰ Cf. http://www.sos-afp.org/en/union_letter

¹¹ SdJ statement (in French) 23-09-09: <http://sudafp2.zeblog.com/419925-statut-la-sdj-demande-un-referendum/>

¹² Cf. Account of French Senate proceedings: <http://www.senat.fr/bulletin/20091026/cult.html#toc8>

¹³ Cf. <http://sudafp.zeblog.com/411501-agence-multimedia-quels-droits-pour-les-salaries/>

¹⁴ Cf. <http://sudafp.zeblog.com/398333-le-nouveau-contrat-d-39-objectifs-et-de-moyens-de-l-39-afp/>

¹⁵ Cf the Louette Report, <http://www.afp-privatisee-non-merci.org/> page 16

¹⁶ Cf. the SNJ-CGT union's statement (in English): <http://www.snj-cgt-afp.org/spip.php?article86>

¹⁷ Cf. "AFP, A History of Agence France Presse 1944-1990" (Robert Laffont), by Jean Huteau and Bernard Ullmann, p. 148. (in French) Key extracts: <http://www.blog4ever.com/blogfichiers/271526/fics/271526091011035822.pdf>