

AFP under Emmanuel Hoog: Business as Usual?



Our new CEO has promised to unveil at least some of his plans for AFP before the main summer break in France, so that staff can have some idea of what awaits us in September. For the moment we have only vague indications – plus a decision to push ahead with moving a large part of the Paris-based editorial structure into new premises outside the main HQ building. That does not augur well for the future, as Hoog has thereby endorsed the *fait accompli* bequeathed him by Pierre Louette and his team.

Pending clearer indications on Emmanuel Hoog's future plans, herewith a list of **SUD's main priorities for the coming year**. To be successful they will require improved coordination between the company's various trade unions, which need to start acting together again.

Immoral and Illegal

"AFP: A World of Differences" was the title of a recent statement by AFP's news director: it was a slightly amended version of the slogan displayed on the company's web site www.afp.com. It could also have been the title of this trade union leaflet, pointing to the fact that **AFP staff are most definitely not all in the same boat**. Depending on our workplace, our labour contract status and a whole range of other variables, we can earn different amounts for the same work, get onto a fast track to promotion or find our careers mysteriously, or not so mysteriously, blocked. Recent appointments provide several examples of the company's arbitrary labour practices.

In recent years, Pierre Louette and his team operated on the basis of divide and rule, publicly denigrating staff and the agency's main assets, in particular its statutes, decried as obsolete. This martial strategy went hand-in-hand with practices that were often immoral and in certain cases illegal, some of them part of a long tradition that goes completely against AFP's statutory obligations. They include violations of tax and labour benefit regulations, failure to respect the laws of both France and foreign states, and the arbitrary sacking of staff on local-status contracts outside the mother country. Under Louette, AFP was notably censored by the HALDE and CNIL agencies (respectively devoted to fighting discrimination and defending privacy rights); it also suffered defeats in French labour tribunals.

Like any new chief executive Emmanuel Hoog is trying to be reassuring, and promoting an ethos of "we're all in this together." But he will have to take stock of the ethical deficiencies bequeathed him by Pierre Louette: we need **a genuine break with past practices**.

Insecure Labour Contracts

Just one example of recent immorality: the AFP grant award ("Bourse AFP"), handed out each year to a student from a French journalism school. The prize? A short-term (CDD) labour contract of three or six months with the agency!

What will be the point of asking a newly appointed PR director to oversee AFP's "brand image" if the said "brand" is devalued by presenting an insecure labour contract as a desirable prize?

French labour law lays down strict conditions as to why and for how long a company may hire people on short-term contracts. AFP does not respect the law, as it uses freelancers, people on temporary CDD contracts, temp workers (and maybe also interns) to make up the numbers in services affected by chronic understaffing. It also uses such people to fill full-status jobs which have illegitimately been downgraded, such as the posts of correspondents in the greater Paris region.

SUD regrets that the joint AFP HQ-status trade unions have not managed to keep up the pressure on this essential problem. We have handed over to the Paris-region labour

inspectorate a document listing known examples of labour-law violations. M. Hoog would do well to not waste any more time: AFP should be setting an example in respecting both the spirit and the letter of the law. **It is high time for a plan to completely end the abuse of insecure labour contracts.**

Local-Status Contracts

The situation of staff formerly employed as freelancers or short-term (CDD) workers in France who agree to take local-status jobs abroad because they have no prospect of being hired at home underlines one of the most pressing moral and social problems AFP faces: the difference in labour rights between "headquarters" and "local status" employees. Whereas international firms such as the telecoms operator Orange are setting up worldwide Works Committees in a bid to try and harmonise labour rights, AFP is content to go on presiding over a neo-colonial mode of organisation - a "*world of differences*" indeed!

After a ruling in its favour by the French discrimination watchdog HALDE, SUD brought a court case to contest the 2008 election of staff representatives to the AFP board of governors, in which non-European staff are not allowed to vote. The case is still pending, and SUD will not give up the fight until non-European and/or local-status staff enjoy the same rights as those on "HQ status".

French Regional Bureaus

In 2003, AFP had a network of 26 bureaus across France, not counting its Paris HQ. Today the number is below 20. Scoops have become rare, and the agency often finds itself running to catch up with news turned out by French regional or national outlets. From being an indispensable news agency it is gradually mutating into a facilitator of the mutualisation of content produced by the private groups that control the French regional dailies (PQR), and even of so-called "citizen journalist" outfits such as the subsidiary [Citizenside](#). A trend that was accentuated by the 2009-2013 Aims and Means Contract with the French state, and which violates the general interest mission laid down by the agency's 1957 statutes.

Among the results of the **dismantling of the French regional network** are a decline in news quality, a standardisation of content, the drying-up of full-status posts and a corresponding loss of job security for journalists.

In many towns where AFP used to have full-status correspondents attached to regional centres, the agency's bureaus are now staffed by freelancers who have to be on call 24 hours a day and seven days a week, in difficult conditions and with no guarantee of ever getting a full-time full-status job. Meanwhile staffing levels in regional bureaus, and also in Paris and its surrounding region, have been cut. Some trade unions have on occasion appeared to consider this inevitable; we say it is time to call a halt. **AFP's French regional network must be rebuilt.**

Equal Opportunities for All

Cronyism and muddling through: who has not at some point realised that our company could much better fulfil its general interest mission if it started by respecting the skills and professional commitment of its staff?

Some find themselves being abruptly rotated in and out of jobs, others benefit from blatant favouritism. The career path for journalists is anything but a "win-win" situation. When management decides to remove someone from their post after two years it has no need to justify the move other than by the argument of "job mobility". The journalist thus "rotated" has no means of recourse, even when the change is clearly a result of **cronyism**. Some enjoy meteoric careers; others meet nothing but obstacles and frustration, at the mercy of management whims. Not forgetting the lack of career prospects for the growing numbers stuck on insecure labour contracts, or for blue-collar or clerical staff who have passed the tests needed to become journalists.

Will M. Hoog put an end to this situation? AFP needs resources to work properly; it also needs ethical standards of management and new union-management relations to create **opportunities and rules applicable to all.**

Pay

The last across-the-board pay increase for HQ-status staff dates back to July 1, 2008. Emmanuel Hoog has been using the blockage in national media industry pay talks as an excuse to make no changes at AFP.

SUD has no illusions about the annual round of bonuses and promotions, because they are unjust and sow division among staff. What we need is **pay rises for all**, along with an **improvement in the agreed minimum career plans**, guaranteeing a basic scale of increases from start to finish. Given the loss in real wage levels, such measures are essential. They are also necessary to ensure editorial independence, because ever-increasing levels of individualisation as regards both careers and wages encourage submission, self-censorship and opportunism. In other words they are not only harmful to staff interests, but also to press freedom.

SUD regrets that the main trade unions which take part in pay talks at the national level do not provide information about the state of play. How can we possibly win any gains if we don't have at least some information and action on the joint union level? Without forgetting freelancers, who always fall by the wayside, and whose income should progress at the same rate as that of other full-status staff.

Work-Related Stress and Unhappiness

For vulnerable people, working at AFP can at times become a hellish experience. Examples: a former management secretary who ends up leaving the company after having been demoted to a job in the basement, and then to staffing the switchboard. A former journalist who sinks into depression, solitude and ill-health.

Faced with serious problems of this type, the previous CEO simply didn't want to know; he basically believed that all AFP staff were spoiled brats. Meanwhile some union reps stood on the sidelines; even stating on some occasions that defending "problem cases" was "unpopular".

It was therefore no surprise that AFP should figure on a **blacklist of major French companies deemed to be not making serious efforts to combat workplace stress**. The list was briefly displayed on the Labour Ministry web site in February 2010; it can be consulted at <http://voila-le-travail.fr/2010/03/02/stress-la-liste-rouge-retrouvee>.

Since the series of highly-publicised workplace suicides at France Télécom, the tide has turned as regards work-related misery. With CEOs fearing possible legal consequences, trying to prevent such situations has become the thing to do. But the solution does not lie simply in providing sensitivity training for managers while ignoring the underlying causes. It is no coincidence if two AFP services in which such problems have recently been raised suffer from chronic understaffing and problems due to restructuring or reorganisation. If management would only respect labour law and collective agreements, and simply listen to staff and give everyone decent career prospects, the tensions would subside.

French-Speaking Influence

SUD was recently invited to sponsor an open letter protesting that "*Agence France Presse is becoming a bit more English-speaking every day*". We decided not to support that initiative, which came at a time when AFP staff were expecting the unions to be more active on the main issues facing the company. Although the decline of **French-speaking influence** at AFP is both real and regrettable, we considered that the open letter in question was not acceptable either in its form or its contents.

The Move to New Paris Premises

It is perfectly understandable that some staff working in dilapidated and/or cramped premises should jump at the prospect of moving, for example into the new premises leased by Pierre Louette in rue Vivienne, just a street away from the HQ building on Place de la Bourse. But management has let the situation in the main building go to seed for months, and even years. Could they perhaps have had an ulterior motive? Whatever the true reasons, Emmanuel Hoog has accepted the *fait accompli* created by his predecessor by validating a plan to move a large part of AFP's editorial team into the new premises.

SUD believes there are other options, notably via a **refurbishment of the HQ building**. We condemn the management project, which could lead in a few years time to a complete move away from AFP's historic HQ building, along with a **restructuring of the agency** on the corporate media model followed in other companies. We also note that management has ridden roughshod over elected staff representatives by undertaking work on the new premises without the required consultations. Claims that the work in question could be reversed are not serious, as the sums involved are considerable. SUD also wants to know **how much money has been squandered** on the rue Vivienne operation, notably in terms of rentals.

Pensions: Of Concern to Young and Old Alike

When our parents and grandparents were at work, the relationship of political and trade union forces ensured that technological progress fed through into **gains for working people**: the abolition of child labour, the five-day week, paid holidays, universal health coverage, pensions. But for over 20 years now, history has been going backwards in most rich countries. In France, measures taken in 1993, 1995 and 2003, and mooted this year by the Sarkozy government, have been pushing back labour rights on the key issue of pensions. The left and the trade unions have not so far been tough enough in fighting these reforms, and in some cases have even supported them, as was the case for the CFDT union in 1995 and 2003.

Although alternative solutions exist, the powers-that-be want us to believe that it has become inevitable for those of us who have jobs to work longer. Whence the debate about **keeping older staff on longer**, and the effects of that policy further down the age-scale. The results of these changes can be clearly seen at AFP: they include work-related stress, and young people who are either unable to get jobs or languishing on insecure contracts.

Two key points:

- We must fight the fallacy which holds that wage earners have to pay in for longer before getting a full pension, and therefore demand the **withdrawal of the Sarkozy-Fillon law**. As soon as the French summer break is over, we must be on strike and in the streets, with a **major day of action set for September 7** by the joint French unions.
- As long as we have not clawed back the right to the pre-2003 situation, in which **37.5 years of contributions were needed to draw a full pension**, to be financed by a **redistribution of wealth**, SUD will fight at AFP for specific measures to help older staff but also and above all for equitable career prospects for EVERYONE. That should in particular involve an improvement in basic career plan agreements; allowing, for example, all journalists to be promoted to Category 6 after 30 years.

**There /s an Alternative to the Sarkozy-Fillon Plan
Let's See some Serious Action in September
Join SUD: Trade Unionism with Teeth**

Paris, Tuesday July 6 2010

SUD-AFP Trade Union
(Union SUD Culture & Médias Solidaires)


SUD Solidaires
AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE