

Round table at the Assemblée nationale:

Laying out a different view of AFP's problems



The timing was excellent: when Emmanuel Hoog is battling to remain head of AFP, the agency's six trade unions received an invitation to meet with lawmakers charged with reviewing the new financing mechanism for AFP put in place in 2015.¹ We seized the occasion to present a different view of AFP's problems: that *they are essentially the result of political choices in the interest of financial groups*. Here is a readout of the March 6 meeting at the Assemblée nationale:²

Preliminary remark

Given the sharp divisions between AFP's trade unions, the first thing at stake was avoiding a cacophony of five or six different messages drowning each other out, as has happened in previous such meetings. We managed to do this: *making several points in a more or less united front, while not papering over our differences on fundamental issues* such as the 2015 reform of AFP's statute or the "Grand Accord d'entreprise" of 2017.

Shared messages to lawmakers

The situation is not good at AFP

Whatever our views on the 2015 reforms, we all said **the French state should compensate 100% of the cost of the public interest mission (MIG)** as European regulations allow. However, *the state is currently underpaying the MIG by €9 million*, as part of the government policy to reduce public expenditure that is being felt throughout public services.

Hoog is not a good CEO

We unanimously said that we want to know the current **salary of the CEO** as well as its evolution since 2010. FO emphasized Hoog's mismanagement and bad decisions. While the agency's current problems are without a doubt partially a result of the CEO's management, SUD argued that they are fundamentally the result of **political and strategic decisions** made by the European Commission and the French government.

Employees should be rewarded for their efforts

AFP's employees are in their sixth year of a **salary freeze** while working conditions continue to deteriorate. This is unacceptable. Especially when Hoog is asking the French state for €60 million, part of which is to fund voluntary departures and *squeeze the lemon a bit harder*. But **when will the remaining employees be compensated for their efforts?**

(/...)

¹ The invitation was extended by Mr Laurent Garcia (MoDem) and Ms. George Pau-Langevin (PS), rapporteurs for the Cultural and Educational Affairs Commission of the Assemblée nationale as part of an evaluation of law n° 2015-433 of 17 April 2015 on modernizing the press sector.

² The intersyndicale delegation:

CGT - Mariem Attiellallah-Kapil, Philippe Faye, Alain Novel

SNJ - Benoît Fauchet

FO - Marc Defontaine, Jean-Pierre Rejeté

SUD - Richard Lein, Claus Tulatz

CFE-CGC - Fatima Bouquet, Jean-Paul Girardeau

Union disagreements expressed clearly

European regulations

The SNJ noted its support for the 2015 reform: it saw the recognition by Brussels of the MIG as a good development that gave hope for the proper financing of the agency. But the SNJ warned against a new reform that risks destroying the 1957 Statute by either moving AFP towards privatization or transforming it into a company whose shares are held by the state.

SUD said that since 1957 AFP has been able to maintain its role as a global news agency *thanks to public subsidies*. The application of competition rules on AFP has braked its development and forced it into over-indebtedness as they *only allow subsidies for operating costs* (such as the MIG) and ban subsidizing investments. AFP's **€80 in debt** is essentially the cost of the disengagement of the state. This is not only the underfinancement of the MIG but the necessity of turning to costly loans and relying on our proper funds for investment since 2003: the leasing of our HQ building, the transformation of the Iris subsidy into a costly loan, high banking fees, the wage restraint policy.

AFP's 1957 Statute was already destroyed by the 2015 reform, we told the lawmakers, adding that *the French government should have confronted Brussels on this issue*.

Because, **under the 2015 Statute**, AFP is no longer exclusively a public interest mission but also has purely commercial activities that do not fall under its MIG, that are in fact *missions of private interest* at the request of certain clients, and are essentially public relations work.

And everything is being done, at the behest of Brussels, to boost these new activities to the detriment of our public interest mission in order to allow the French state to lower its financing of the agency -- the 1,000 new clients that the CEO wants to find are mainly for non-MIG activities. And all this is being done in the knowledge that the European Commission is going to wipe the slate clean regarding public financing of media in 2025. AFP's finances haven't been put on a secure footing. Instead of a CDI we were handed a CDD that limited public financing both temporally and materially to a certain perimeter. And there is no perspective of escaping this downward spiral.

The 10 March 2017 Accord d'entreprise

The SNJ defended the "Grand Accord" as a "defensive accord" that avoided worse sacrifices by AFP's employees.

SUD gave an overview of the negatives of this accord: reductions of wage scales (in particular for new hires), cuts in the number of days off... We noted that AFP has adopted commercial management methods such as understaffing, underpayment, long working hours that could lead to burnout and depression.

These reforms -- or sacrifices demanded from staff -- will eventually generate only €4 million per year in savings, which pales against the lost revenue of €9 million per year from under-financing of the MIG by the French state.

This shows that the "Grand Accord" had another, which was also perhaps its main objective: providing *legal security* for the non-payment of overtime hours by the introduction of the *forfait jours* at the agency. SUD noted that we are expecting a court ruling on the forfait jours for journalists on March 13.

Governance

The lawmakers wanted to know if the 2015 reform led to any improvements in AFP's governance. The SNJ pointed out that the journalists obtained an additional

representative on AFP's board of governors. Meanwhile, the CGT said that the addition of independent board members has led to better debates. But overall, no major changes.

SUD indicated that the decree implementing the reform needs to be changed as it contains Orwellian measures to promote sexual parity that require same-sex lists of candidates.³

And the **Higher Council**? We were unanimous in saying that we have practically no information on its work and that there is no transparency. For example, it was in reading a recent Senate report⁴ that we learned that the Higher Council is in favor of a new reform of AFP's statute. "In the past this sort of announcement would have triggered a strike," we noted.

SUD believes that since 2015 the Higher Council has become the de facto representative of the European Commission in AFP's management. Its institutional role is to ensure that the French state doesn't over-compensate the MIG (laughable, given the chronic underfunding).

Other issues raised by SUD

AFP in France

On one hand **the French state doesn't pay a just price for the public service mission** it has confided to AFP, and on the other, **our main French clients have since 2008 received considerable discounts**. This is not a question of market forces, but lobbying and political decisions by the government that were implemented by AFP's management.

We noted that in contrast to the situation on the international level, there is not a free market in France. Certainly, the market is in some ways less distorted than it was 30 or 50 years ago, but free it is not when 90% of the French media belong to nine billionaires who hoover up most of the state aid to the sector. The state does not impose conditions (such as on concentration of ownership, merging of editorial operations, paying fair wages and a just price for AFP's services...).

The result: according to our CEO as cited in the recent Senate report **AFP is losing €10 million per year due to lowering its tariffs for French clients!**

AFP on the international level

The above puts into perspective the relative commercial success of AFP on the international level, which Brussels and the French state are looking towards as a source of revenue to allow reducing public financing of the agency. That "success" of international revenue as a percentage of total revenue is mostly a mechanical increase due to the drop in French revenue (without a loss of major clients). And still 42% of commercial revenue is generated in France, we noted.

Francophonie

SUD noted that the French language is expected to see spectacular growth in the coming decades thanks to demographic changes underway in Africa. We thus have a need to position ourselves strategically in Africa. However this is a mission impossible when we have a short-term management strategy focussed mostly on finding 1,000 new clients, moreover mostly non-traditional clients outside the media for non-MIG activities.

³ See <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article369>

⁴ « L'AFP : bombe à retardement ou champion français ? » - <http://u.afp.com/o4Uk>

Moreover, the CEO recently remarked at a conference (he rarely talks with unions): that the Chinese news agency is making inroads in Africa and elsewhere by cutting prices. It is now benefitting from a strong commercial position thanks to the Chinese state, much like AFP enjoyed in the 1950s-1970s.

SUD noted that many francophone posts in this region have been transformed into anglophone posts. We also denounced the fact that AFP photo captions are made exclusively in English, even when they are of French subjects that will be used essentially by French clients (such as photos of French parliamentary debates). Incomprehensible when the more than €100 million we receive in subsidies each year is partially justified as support for the French language.

SUD-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)

12 March 2018



Documents submitted to the lawmakers by SUD at the meeting

SUD-AFP, a member of the Union Syndicale SUD Culture and Medias Solidaires, is one of six elected unions at AFP. Internet site: <http://www.sud-afp.org>

Évaluation des réformes de 2015

(Accord avec Bruxelles, Statut, Contrat d'objectif et des moyens, Accord d'entreprise)

Résumé de l'analyse de la situation faite par SUD :

* Plateforme des listes SOS-AFP présentées à l'occasion de l'élection 2017 des représentants du personnel au Conseil d'administration de l'AFP. (Ces listes ont recueilli 18,45% parmi les journalistes et 16,19% parmi les personnels techniques et administratifs) -

http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/fr_j_def.pdf

L'AFP et les règles européennes de la concurrence

"Mesures utiles" pour l'AFP - Indolores ou nocives ?

* Analyse SUD - http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/20150113_sud_fin_contentieux_ue.pdf

* La "lettre de mesures utiles" (document de la Commission européenne) -

http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/mesures_utiles_ue.pdf

Le nouveau Statut de 2015

* L'AFP sous la loi de Bruxelles - résumé SUD -

http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/2015_04_02_sud_statut_afp.pdf

* Dossier complet sur le site SUD - <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article132>

Le Contrat d'Objectifs et de Moyens 2014-2018

* L'indépendance de l'AFP ? C'est fini ! - Analyse SUD -

http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/20150608_com_independance.pdf

Le "Grand Accord" d'entreprise du 10 mars 2017

* Un texte qui divise et ne règle rien - 4-pages publiée par SUD fin mars 2017 -

http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/20170321_sud_ga_suite.pdf

* Documentation complète - <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article459>

Décret d'application de 2015 : des règles de parité ubuesques

* Communiqué SUD - <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article368>

Les syndicats à l'AFP

Dernière mesure de représentativité en 2014:

CGT 33,9% - SNJ 26,8% - FO 12,9% - CFDT 11,3% - SUD 11,2% - CGC 4,0%.

Dans le collège journalistes, le SNJ de l'AFP obtient 43,3% (SUD est à 13,5%). Chez les cadres la CFE-CGC est à 23,1%.

* Résultats complets 2014 : http://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/res_2014_analyse.pdf