

Worldwide Staffing, Future of English Service: Much Room for Improvement

SUD-AFP's Account of the July 19 Works Committee Meeting

The main items on the agenda at the AFP Works Committee's latest meeting were worldwide staffing levels, the official annual report on in-house social indicators and the future of the company's English-language service.

The announcement that the directors for human relations and information systems were both leaving the company "for personal reasons", amid continuing crises around both HR issues and the new "Iris" editorial system, came after the meeting took place.¹

Insecure Contracts: Now You See Them, Now you Don't

To judge by management's official figures for HQ-status staff, the number of people on **insecure labour contracts** has not changed much: 5.8% of AFP journalists employed under French labour law were on short-term contracts ("CDD") in 2012. Management claims to have both created new posts and acted to pay off an accumulated "social debt", notably via an agreement with the unions on insecure contracts (SUD refused to sign the latter as we considered it as too timid and confusing).²

However behind the official figures, provided notably in the legally-binding "Annual Social Survey" (*Bilan social*), is a veritable archipelago of **hidden labour insecurity**. This includes freelancers - working both under French law and under a variety of local statuses abroad - and local-status staff in general. The latter include what we have dubbed "low-cost expatriates" - the increasing numbers of AFP staff who are being asked to relinquish the protections of French contracts and their associated benefits in exchange for a chance to work abroad.

One in five French-based Staff on Insecure Contracts

Management's figures show that as of June 30, 2013, a total of **3,125** people were on AFP's worldwide payroll. This includes all permanent and temporary staff as well as freelancers, but not people working for AFP subsidiaries, of which the German operation is by far the biggest.

Of that total, **1,301** people were working in France (not including overseas territories), with the remaining **1,824** employed elsewhere in the world.

Of the 1,301 people employed in France, no less than 270 were on insecure labour contracts: 210 as freelancers, 57 on short-term "CDD" contracts and three employed by temporary labour agencies.

The percentage of French-based staff on insecure contracts therefore stands at 20.8%, or just over one in five.

It should be noted that these figures are in fact conservative estimates, as they do not include people employed as interns, apprentices or self-employed workers. They also exclude the category of "local press correspondents" in towns and cities around France.

Insecurity Abroad: Almost Four in Ten

The 1,824 people employed by AFP outside France proper breaks down into 289 expatriates with French (HQ) status, 832 people on permanent local status contracts, 35 on short-term local contracts and 668 freelancers. It should be noted that these figures include all categories of staff - administrative, technical and service personnel as well as journalists.

Even if we assume that permanent local status contracts provide similar job security to "CDI" contracts in France - which is in fact not true in many countries - then **the proportion of staff employed on insecure contracts outside France comes to 703, or 38.5% of the total.**

The fragility of many local status contracts, even supposedly permanent ones, has recently been vividly illustrated by the **brutal firings of journalists in Zagreb and Belgrade.**

Rights of Representation for All!

Under present arrangements, local-status staff have no right of representation by trade unionists in Paris, and in many countries local trade unions are weak or even nonexistent.

The latest AFP figures show that local status staff account for almost half of all AFP employees: a total of 1,590 people had French labour contracts in 2012, ie **50.9%** of the worldwide total (excluding AFP GmbH in Germany).

Such labour insecurity and lack of rights is not worthy of a worldwide news agency invested with a "public interest" mission that requires it to guarantee the quality of information needed by a democratic society.

Needless to say, labour insecurity is also linked to a failure to hire enough staff. The Annual Social Survey for 2012 shows that only 37 people were taken on under permanent HQ status contracts during the year, 25 of them journalists.

Time Off Sick: An Indicator of Distress

The "*Bilan Social*" also shows a continuing increase, among HQ status staff, of the average number of days lost due to sick leave. For the category of white collar administrative staff (*cadres administratifs*), the figure was 12.7 days per person in 2012, an increase of

1 AFP staff will find management's statement on the departures on the ASAP intranet site.

2 See our statement (French only) at <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article141>

50% over the figure for 2011. Among journalists, 7.8 days per employee were lost during the year, a rise of 15%. The category of blue-collar operatives (*ouvriers*) also saw a strong rise (25%) in days lost.

Such changes are a clear indicator of distress, not to say of stress, among the workforce.

Continuing Wage Freeze - But Not for Everyone

Another significant indicator in the Social Survey concerns AFP's total wages bill. When adjusted to account for the total number of employees, **the average monthly wages bill actually declined in 2012**, for staff as a whole and for journalists and most other staff taken separately. The only categories for which the figure increased were those of non-journalist white-collar staff (technical and administrative *cadres*), but that may simply reflect a small number of hirings at top management level.

Over a two year period (2010-2012) **average per-employee pay rose by just 3.14%**. However in the same period **the total bill for the ten highest salaries at the agency was up by 4.22%, to 1.55 million euros in 2012**. That amounts to an average gross monthly salary of 11,918 euros.

The Social Survey also notes that under French law, **ALL HQ status staff should enjoy an average work week of 35 hours**. Needless to say, that is purely theoretical, and many staff find themselves working far longer hours, thanks notably to chronic understaffing.

In many cases, staff don't even benefit from a clearly-defined work schedule or rota. As for staff subject to "on-call hours" (*astreintes*) for various services and bureaux, they will be surprised to learn that for AFP management, such arrangements don't even exist.³

Also discussed during the Works Committee meeting: the AFP training budget. The percentage of the total wages bill devoted to the latter declined between 2011 and 2012, from 3.51% to 3.11%. And most of what training was provided related to the new Iris system, leaving little scope for other projects.

Mediocre Results Overall

The law requires the Works Committee's elected members to vote on the annual Social Survey. SUD-AFP would most definitely have voted against the **mediocre results** shown in the latest edition, but for technical reasons our union no longer has a vote because its elected member, David Sharp, has retired. Among the other members, the CFDT, FO and SNJ members abstained in the vote, while two CGT members voted in favour of the document.

Whither AFP's English Service?

Does the English-language service need to be reoriented to attract "*young people who no longer read newspapers*" and for whom news is supposedly just another consumer choice?

That was one of the main ideas presented to the Works Committee by the member of management charged with introducing the subject.

Fortunately, his contribution was put into context by the CEO, who noted the importance of current efforts to define AFP's "public interest mission" in conformity with European Union competition rules. Emmanuel Hoog said that both management and the French government were seeking to have the European Commission recognise that all AFP's services, in all languages, are of public interest ("*Services of General Economic Interest*", in the EU's jargon). The agency works in a "*plurilingual context of general interest*", M. Hoog noted.

SUD expressed satisfaction at the CEO's statement, recalling that the English Service had been cited as one of the priorities of the 2009-2013 Aims and Means Contract (COM) with the French government, a document that had been aimed at destroying the agency's 1957 statutes.⁴

Noting that the commercial objectives laid out for the English Service were far from being attained, SUD also called for a good hard look at it and the other non-French services. **AFP needs to develop all of its services within the clear framework laid down by the agency's public interest mission.**

We also pointed out that the numerous differences of status, and therefore of social, professional and trade-union rights, between staff are particularly significant in the English Service, as they are in the other non-French services.

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SUD-AFP (SUD Culture & Médias Solidaires)

Address of this document on the web: <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article212>

Original French version: <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article210>

For more info on SUD-AFP (including on how to join): sudafp@orange.fr. You need us - and we need you!



³ Cf recent accounts of the monthly union-management meetings provided via the company Intranet: <http://asap.afp.com/asap/rhportal/communiques/reponses-direction-dpj/>

⁴ For more info in English on these questions, see the "SOS-AFP" web site: <http://www.sos-afp.org/en/stories-list/13> and <http://www.sos-afp.org/en/documents-list/13>.