

Union-Management Talks: Major Challenges Loom



There is little doubt that AFP management is gearing up to launch a new round of talks with unions on CEO Emmanuel Hoog's plan for a "**new social contract**" within the agency. They await only the end of the staff elections, currently under way.

Earlier this year, some of the HQ-status unions decided to boycott the talks leading up to these negotiations, but *SUD* was not one of them. We played an active part in the many preparatory meetings, putting forward our own arguments at each stage. This allowed us to keep you fully informed¹, and ensure transparency.

With the talks due to resume soon between management and some of the unions, *SUD* will again not stand on the sidelines. We will intervene actively, with as usual the following key aims:

- **To keep you informed, so you can make up your own minds and weigh in on the results**
- **To propose alternatives to defend both staff interests and AFP's public interest mission**

Making Proposals, Taking Action

During the three-year period just ending, *SUD* has been a party to all union-management talks, and we decided to sign² the main agreements reached. In particular we made progress on gender equality, and on the minimum career plan for HQ-status journalists. Changes made to the latter on *SUD*'s insistence removed an anomaly whereby certain journalists could end their AFP career with less than 5th category.

At the same time, we have always refused to sign just any old deal, and for each of the agreements signed since 2011, we have laid out our arguments.³

Which is precisely what we will do over the coming months. The key issues will be:

➤ **AFP's Finances**

SUD reacted as soon as the French government published its draft budget for 2015, with the traditional line item on the state contribution to AFP's finances. As we pointed out⁴, the document confirms the state's determination to further cut its support for the agency. While government support rose by 1.8% per year between 2009 and 2013, as laid down in the Aims and Means Contract for that period, the increase is due to fall to 1.6% next year, 0.6% in 2016 and 0.3% in 2017.

AFP management is expected to make up the shortfall by boosting the company's commercial sales, and by making new savings on staff costs.

SUD opposes this withdrawal of state support for AFP. We will take part in united actions to oppose austerity policies, including the 2015 state budget and the new Aims and Means Contract (*COM*) currently under negotiation for AFP. The latter is likely to set the government's, and AFP management's, austerity plans in stone.

➤ **The Agency's Founding Statutes**

We were the first to point out the main problem in the new draft law being proposed by Michel Françaix and several of his fellow-socialist MPs⁵. The new law would undermine the heart of the agency's mission, as laid out in the first two articles of the 1958 law that defines its statutes⁶.

¹ For all items in French on the "*nouveau contrat social*", see <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?mot276>. For all of *SUD*-AFP's texts in English: <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?mot274>.

² Under French labour law, a union-management agreement is deemed valid if signed by unions representing at least 50% of total votes cast during the staff elections. *SUD* will refuse to sign any agreement that is either retrograde or of no practical use to staff.

³ See our list of agreements reached over the period (French only): <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article281>

⁴ *SUD*-AFP statement (in French and English) at <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article299>.

⁵ See our September 29 statement in English, entitled "*Unanswered Questions*": <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article297>.

⁶ For a full English translation of AFP's statutes, and related information, see <http://www.sos-afp.org/en/statutes>.

The statutes define AFP in terms of a public interest mission and nothing else, which is the way it should be. However the proposed new law would add a reference to activities that "*are not part of the general interest missions*", thereby undermining the overall structure and validating a whole raft of dubious activities. Examples of such non-core activities include the disastrous "*Newswag*" episode under the mandate of CEO Pierre Louette (at a cost of at least 2.2 million dollars), and the ongoing saga of the *AFP Services* subsidiary.

The changes being proposed are linked both to the French state's desire to cut its support for AFP and to the European Union's competition policy. The result would be that AFP would be condemned to seek ever-increasing sales, which would inevitably mean yet more activities falling outside the public interest mission.

Whence management proposals for ever-more diversification and the launching of projects to cater for individual clients, in other words to satisfy **particular rather than general interests**.

SUD will not give an inch in defending what we see as AFP's essential mission.

➤ **The Dangers of Externalisation**

Defending AFP's DNA also means defending the unity of both the company itself and of its staff. *SUD* has always fought for all AFP staff to enjoy the same professional, democratic and social rights. We have denounced the fact that the agency's activities in German are not considered as being part of its public interest mission, and that staff in Germany were excluded from the recent elections to the AFP board—the only poll which is truly worldwide and cross-category.

SUD has opposed moves to spin off certain activities, be they editorial, administrative or technical, as subsidiaries. That goes both for "*AFP Services*" and its low-cost journalism subsidiary "*AFP Media Services*" and for the planned technical financing subsidiary mooted by MP Michel Françaix.

➤ **Wages and the Freelance Budget**

In talks with management, *SUD* has clearly demonstrated the insincerity of the cost-cutting plans mooted by the CEO⁷. Even as it keeps growth of the overall wages bill below 1% a year, as it is currently doing for HQ-status staff, management is seeking to extend the wage freeze and the cuts to the freelance budget for France. For it knows that the state is reducing its contribution, and that commercial sales are not going to make up the shortfall.

SUD will oppose these austerity-based policies and fight for overall wage increases, including for freelancers.

➤ **Coherent and Fair Career Plans**

Each and every AFP staffer should be able to move ahead during his or her career at the agency. Insecure labour contracts, along with staffing cuts, make these aims more difficult to achieve, particularly with a management that is prone to favouritism. Now Human Resources is using a new law to try and bring in individual staff interviews. The danger is that such a move could become yet another way to strengthen cronyism and other unfair practices. At the same time, the demand for interviews to discuss their careers appeals to many staff, who feel the need for more visibility as regards their prospects for advancement. We will therefore need to clearly define and defend staff rights, and restrict management's ability to abuse such interviews.

SUD will refuse any arrangement that replaces the existing minimum career path agreements with conditional access to certain pay categories.

- **Give us a new mandate to push ahead with, and step up, our action**
- **Vote *SUD*, and ask your colleagues to do the same!**

Paris, October 16, 2014

SUD-AFP Trade Union (Solidarity – Unity – Democracy)



⁷ See our statement in English at <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article286>.