

When AFP sets a bad example



AFP's management and all the representative trade unions except *SUD* have signed a second *workplace agreement on the social impact of the COVID-19 epidemic*. This revision of the agreement signed on April 9 partially corrects the most contentious element – leaving stringers with a drop in income. However, the change falls short of what we would expect from an *emblematic company* such as AFP, which in its new contract signed with the French state (COM 2019-2020), voiced the ambition to "*strive towards being an example in the areas of social and environmental responsibility*".

Is the glass half full or half empty?

Positive points: The new agreement¹ limits the imposition of days off and guarantees that AFP will complement the indemnity received by all staff employees placed in the French government's paid furlough program so they do not lose any salary.

Negative points: The agreement still imposes the same number of days off be used even though not all employees have the same number of holiday days, and *stringers are the only employee category that doesn't benefit from a 100% salary guarantee*. The agreement contains provisions that differ from labor law and our workplace practices, and it binds unions to management's logic for the upcoming *editorial reform*.

After weighing these points, *SUD* decided not to sign the agreement.

Savings made at expense of stringers

The most vulnerable should be protected! This was the spirit of the call by national journalist unions² for stringers to receive the same benefits as staff.

This didn't stop the local chapters at AFP of two of those unions from signing the April 9 agreement³ which provided for only 85 percent of the average gross wage for regular stringers. And in a particularly mean-spirited provision, any stringer who ended up earning more in 2020 than in 2019 would have to pay back the difference. No doubt AFP's regular stringers will be thankful that in the new agreement AFP has agreed to renounce that provision.

According to management, under the new agreement eligible stringers will see AFP top up the amount paid by the state to reach around 92% of their net average monthly earnings.

SUD notes however that the formula used to create that average salary excludes top ups for the 13th month and 10% vacation pay, which normally should be taken into account. While the paid furlough scheme does provide money to employees at the moment they need it most, *social cotisations* aren't made and this could later hurt stringers if they need to claim unemployment and when they reach retirement.

But most importantly, **why are any employees being asked to make a financial sacrifice? And why are the most vulnerable journalists – stringers – the only ones forced to make such a financial sacrifice?** *SUD* rejects this perverse logic.

Staff = Swiss Army knives / Stringers = second-class journalists?

According to the text of the agreement, the signatories "*agree on that fact that, in order to maintain activity, an individualized recourse to paid furloughs for stringers is necessary.*" (our emphasis)

¹ https://www.sud-afp.org/IMG/pdf/avenant_accord_covid_vp.pdf

² <https://www.acrimed.org/Proteger-les-journalistes-remunere-e-s-a-la-pige>

³ <https://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article605>

AFP will now ask the labor regulator (Direccte) to authorize putting some 170 regular stringers in France on the paid furlough program in May (for April work).

The problem: as our CEO Fabrice Fries noted in his May 5 message to staff, is that "We are thus fortunate not to be in a stranglehold: our core business should not feel the full effects of the crisis until a few months from now." **So, how do you justify that some staff are put on paid furlough? And in particular, the stringers and only the stringers.**

The explanation agreed upon by the signatories of the new agreement appeals to the professional duty of journalists for those on staff, while being discriminatory and borderline insulting of stringers:

"In order to maintain its activity, AFP must rely upon the specific competences of staff journalists, that is:

- *their versatility*
- *their adaptability.*"

But in contrast the stringers are "not subject to the requirement of professional (nor geographical) mobility and are often specialized in a specific area." As "they are less easily versatile" the possibilities for "maintaining activity are thus necessarily limited."

For SUD, the only difference between staff journalists and regular stringers is their legal status, the precarious nature of their work contract. You only need to look at AFPTV to see that stringers do the same jobs as staff and it is these "low cost" employees that have in large part helped it become one of the Agency's key services.

COVID-19, a pretext for imposing new sacrifices

The new agreement (which is valid until *December 31, 2020!*) explicitly adheres to the logic of the government's decrees which *derogate from civil and social rights* and install a *state of emergency*. Management has profited from the situation to already make some savings and impose the notions of "versatility" and "adaptability" which will be at core of the future *reform of the newsroom*.

Articles 4.1 and 4.2 of the agreement are most worrisome in this sense. In essence they describe staff journalists as being **Swiss Army knives** and **pawns** that management can move at its whim. **A dangerous precedent!** Until now, the terms "versatility" and "adaptability" had never been accepted by trade unions at AFP. In the current context, these concepts give an employer the possibility to demand ever more efforts from employees without any counterparties.

The issue isn't financial, but ideological

That AFP, which was subsidized by the French state to the tune of €124.4 million last year, puts its most vulnerable journalists on paid furlough without maintaining their full salary sends **an extremely bad signal**. The refusal to provide 100% of salary is above all ideological as it will allow French private media bosses to say: "Look, even at AFP...!"

According to our estimates, even if the stringers concerned carried out no work, the state's current part of the paid furlough compensation comes out at around €141,750 for the month. The cost to raise the level of compensation to 100% is €60,750.

In his email to staff, Mr. Fries emphasized the essential role that AFP is playing in the current situation and that we are in fact "*an essential component of our media clients' business continuity plans*". Why not make that argument to the government and request a special subsidy to fully compensate our stringers, instead of insisting upon the need to always make more savings at the expense of staff?

Refuse to pay the bill for the crisis!

Paris, May 11, 2020

SUD-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)

