

Remote working:

SUD doesn't sign blank checks



On December 18, on the final day before the Christmas vacation period, AFP's management announced the signature of two new addenda to the 2017 collective workplace agreement: one which sets the general framework for remote working or "télétravail", and the other which sets out the conditions during the renovation of the HQ building in 2021¹.

SUD, the second-largest trade union in the newsroom and the second-largest inter-categorical union, participated actively in the negotiations but chose not to sign them. Here's why:

Forcing our hands on télétravail?

Renovating the HQ building while most staff continue to work there would have been uncomfortable and taken longer (not to mention cost more and risk exposure to asbestos) so AFP's management chose to empty the building and use the Vivienne offices as temporary working space for all.

But as there is insufficient space to hold everyone, for the plan to work nearly all staff must accept working from home a majority of the time from March to December 2021, if not longer. Management wants journalists to work from home three days per week. For non-journalists it is four days per week.

For *SUD*, the negotiations on télétravail could not be separated completely from the transfer to Vivienne. Because even with most people working from home most of the time, it was not clear Vivienne will be big enough. Just how many workplaces will there be? What will the working conditions be like?

SUD did not succeed in getting the information it judged essential to ensure the health and well-being of staff. Despite our repeated requests, management refused to link the two subjects. It presented plans for Vivienne to staff representatives *the day after* the period for signing the addenda...

SUD thus refused to sign the addenda, considering that doing so at this point was giving management a blank check on working conditions during the renovations. And there are good reasons to worry that dismal working conditions, as well as an overall lack of workplaces, will push people to work from home. In such conditions the voluntary nature of télétravail – a legal requirement – is just theoretical.

We remain very cautious on the subject of télétravail because if some have discovered during confinement that it can be convenient, others suffer from the isolation and lack of contact with their colleagues. Another period of intense télétravail won't help these people.

Worn-out chairs and dusty screens?

SUD finds disappointing management's position on télétravail expenses as well as the unwillingness of most trade unions to push harder on the issue.

¹ See these agreements here <http://u.afp.com/UJuh>

To encourage staff to work from home **during the renovations**, management agreed to pay 10, 20 or 30 euros per month for expenses for working 2, 3, or 4 days per week from home. But once the renovations are finished, so are the payments. AFP will no longer pay anything for additional heating costs, electricity, etc. due to télétravail.

SUD consulted a lawyer who specializes on such issues to analyze management's proposals and the jurisprudence on work expenses. In fact, employees do have the right to reimbursement for télétravail expenses, whether it be during the period the HQ building is being renovated or not. Unfortunately, without a common front among trade unions on this question management was able to refuse paying télétravail expenses during normal times that it plans to pay during the renovation.

And for management it is also out of the question to systematically equip staff with a second screen despite a small laptop screen being insufficient for most. Instead people will have to dip into a 200-euro allocation (or 50 percent of expenses up to a reimbursement of 250 euros) meant for equipment to improve their home offices. This budget (over a 5-year period) is insufficient to buy a screen AND an ergonomic chair. Those in Paris will have the opportunity to take a screen and a chair from their office. But choose well, as AFP doesn't provide any warranties...

A glass half full?

For those who see the glass as half empty, the addenda do contain some advances:

- Télétravail is more accessible, after years during which management grudgingly approved requests ... until the Covid-19 pandemic. *SUD* was also able to obtain the modification of the request form which resembled too much an employee self-evaluation.
- The suppression of a requirement employees submit an attestation that their electric installation meets code (and management was unwilling to pay an inspection).
- Two days of télétravail per week are possible during ordinary periods, up from one.
- The framework addendum is for 2 years. We'll renegotiate the conditions for remote working at the end of 2022.

... but of what?

While we're disappointed we didn't get more for expenses, *SUD* believes it helped push towards final texts which are more or less balanced, if not perfect. We hope that management will finally respond to our concerns about the transition period at Vivienne.

In any case, we're going to be monitoring closely the implementation of télétravail during the renovations period and beyond, including its impact on how the Agency is organized and staff relations. Plans to transfer tasks from Paris desks overseas to staff on local contracts are already underway.

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***SUD*-AFP (Solidaires-Unitaires-Démocratiques)**

