

No to a two-track AFP!

As the years pass a deeper and deeper chasm is emerging in the newsroom: between those who leave for posts abroad on French contracts with expatriate status and those who go as locals, for lack of better options...

The cause: these expat posts are becoming scarce while management has created more local contract posts, including those clearly destined for journalists arriving from France.

The latest example: the elimination of the **Paris French desk overnight shift**. After an initial test in 2021, when three posts were shifted to Hong Kong (one expat, two local), the last nail was beaten into the coffin when management pushed its plan through the Social and Economic Committee (CSE) despite the strong opposition by staff representatives.

The plan appears simple on the surface: the transfer of 10 posts of editors from Paris to Hong Kong. Given the time difference we'll be able to avoid having people work at night, which is something everyone agrees is bad for people's health.¹

Expat status: reserved for managers only

But surprise: Three posts disappear! Without the need to provide additional days off for night work as required in France, the transfer means each editor working during the day in Hong Kong is at their post for more days in the year. Management refuses to commit to redeploying these posts. It could also eliminate them to attain the target under the CEO's transformation plan, as despite the "voluntary departure plan" imposed in 2019-2020, it still has four French-contract journalist positions to cut out of 28 planned.

Another point of disagreement: Out of the seven posts transferred to Hong Kong, five will be local status! And as has become usual, it is the posts of plain editors which become local, meaning they don't benefit from housing and schooling benefits, among others. In short, these posts seem destined for young and single journalists. As for the two managers, they get expat contracts with all of the usual benefits.

We clearly see here the two-track system: Production journalists and desk editors are on local contracts while expat contracts are reserved for managers.

An AFP invention: a local expat!

We can even say that AFP, in its cost-cutting zeal, has managed to create something new: the local expat!

If young French journalists want that professionally enriching experience of working abroad they may also find themselves in a personally impoverishing experience as they have less in terms of social protections. Not to mention the risk of seeing their wages in local currency evaporate in the case of a spurt of inflation that AFP never seems willing to compensate for.

All of which engenders feelings of a **lack of recognition** or even **injustice** among these "low-cost" expats. Is this the message we want to send to the young journalists after all the trouble AFP has gone through to recruit and train them?

And if these young journalists end up finding the golden ticket of a HQ contract, what are their chances of working abroad at a later date? Slim unless they manage to quickly reach the glass elevator to become a manager or... go local and lose even more precious years of contributing towards a French pension.

(/...)

¹ We don't address here the selection of Hong Kong, which is contestable given the current situation

The wage bill obsession

With the gradual switch from expat to local status posts over the years the lack of expat positions is now being keenly felt. Management recently acknowledged that there are currently around **24 less expat posts** than fixed under the 2017 workplace agreement (which *SUD* refused to sign).

The workplace agreement was meant to set a minimum number of expat posts, according to the unions which signed it. But promises are only made to those who believe in them, especially when for management it is primordial to contain the wage bill...

This cost-cutting obsession has already hit **photographers** hard, with expat posts nearly non-existent. Meanwhile, the **video service** has pretty much been built on local contracts. Among non-journalists, the technicians have seen expatriate jobs disappear and administrative and technical staff bore the brunt of the voluntary departure plan.

SUD calls for a better deal for everyone

In 2023, management plans to open negotiations on journalist mobility. This could be an opportunity to untangle the system, if management abandons its simplistic bean-counting mindset. For *SUD*, a successful reform starts with decent salaries and benefits for all staff, not just for managers, and irrespective of the type of their contract. And if they have to go local, young journalists should at least have the guarantee of being given a permanent HQ contract after a reasonable period of no more than three years.

Finally, there must be real opportunities for expatriation, both for "junior" journalists and for "senior" ones, who may also want to go abroad at the end of their careers. The very attractiveness of AFP within the French media is at stake.

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***SUD*-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)**

