

Workplace Agreement of March 10, 2017:

The “Grand Accord” turns five – Anyone celebrating?

On March 10, 2017, AFP’s management and the CGT, SNJ and CFDT trade unions signed *the single workplace agreement intended to overhaul almost all the social agreements for “headquarters status” employees.*¹ Five years later, **what has happened to our wages, work conditions and our career perspectives?** SUD presents a non-exhaustive review and its propositions.



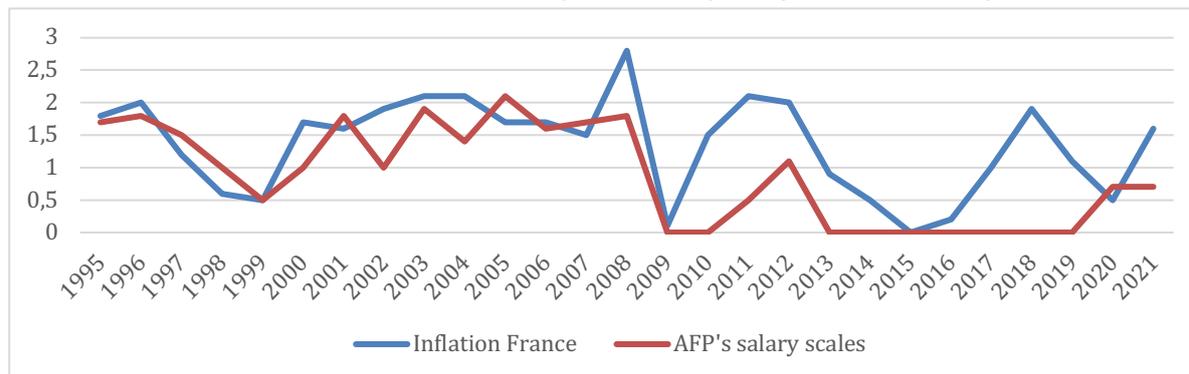
Purchasing power at half mast

Before the “Grand Accord”

Before the global financial crisis of 2008, our wages more or less followed the rise in prices (see the graphic below). The considerable influence of strident trade unions in the national press negotiation branch (SPQN) resulted in regular **wake hikes that compensated for inflation.** At AFP, that translated into one or even two increases per year in the value of the point our wage scales are based upon.

For technical and administrative staff, this effective mechanism was guaranteed by their **workplace agreements.** For journalists, it was **company practice,** as the Paris Appeals Court noted in its September 19, 2019 ruling in the lawsuit brought by CGT, FO and SUD.² Moreover, under another company practice most of our **bonuses** were also regularly adjusted.

Evolution of the French consumer price index (Insee) and AFP’s salary scales



Note: the 2020 and 2021 increase in the wage scales was the result of the lawsuit

AFP under the “Grand Accord”

The 2017 Workplace Agreement *dismantled* the protective wage policy won by our elders. The “Grand Accord” that replaced the previous conventions, agreements and practices in force at AFP **no longer includes any binding mechanism for collective wage increases.**

The result: collectively, we have not benefited from any significant increase that would compensate for inflation. Instead, we have the NAO annual wage talks where management offers:

- bonuses and promotions for a small percentage of staff chosen at its discretion
- bonuses paid in years when there is are large profits (*participation*) or based on deals with tech platforms (*neighboring rights*)
- and possibly even gift certificates (on which it doesn’t pay taxes).

¹ See SUD’s collection of articles on the “Grand Accord” and its amendments: <http://u.afp.com/UFxF>

² See our collection of articles and documents on the lawsuit: <http://u.afp.com/33A7>

Most of these measures do not contribute to our social protection systems or our future retirement.

Furthermore, the "Grand Accord" sharply reduced the **starting wages** for *administrative and technical staff*.

SUD's proposals

SUD needs your support to take the offensive on wages:

- **The salaries of all must be regularly increased, at least to compensate for inflation** and to stop the financial erosion that we have suffered for years.³
- **Starting wages should be revised higher**, in function of the *level of the skills* of new recruits and the *cost of living*.
- **The system of automatic wage increases should be improved and extended to the second half of our professional careers**, that is beyond the first 20 years. That will help us counter discrimination as a result of promotions made at management's discretion and take into account that we now need to work longer to retire with a full pension.

Work hours and conditions, time off...

In keeping with the logic of social progress over the past 150 years (see the chart below), AFP concluded agreements applying the 2000 law on reducing the work week to 35 hours that had different number of vacation and RTT days for different professional categories.

But in reality, production journalists and certain managers **worked considerably longer hours** (of 45 hours per week), without any financial compensation or additional days off.

Instead of creating more jobs and reducing working hours, the "Grand Accord" legalized these excessive working hours and extended it to more staff.

For certain among us, that extension of working hours was cushioned by two measures:

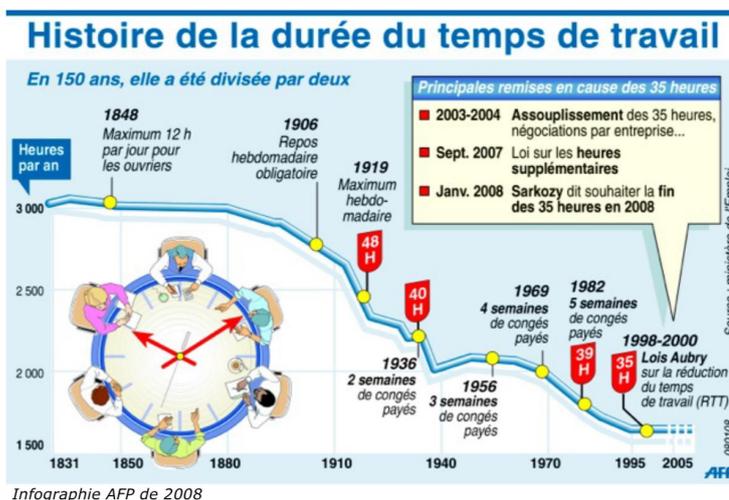
⇒ The introduction of a **congé d'ancienneté**: 2 days after 5 years of service, 4 days after 10 years of service, 6 days after 15 years of service.

⇒ The introduction of the **forfait jours**: journalists and managers who sign up to this get additional days off, but *at the price of accepting working hours and rhythms that put their health at risk*.

Summary of social setbacks:

Journalists (J): all benefited from 44 vacation days (based on a 6-day work week = 37 days on a 5-day work week) and 18 RTT days. The "Grand Accord" divided journalists into different groups. If the number of vacation days did not change, the number of additional days off did:

- **Journalists who opted for the forfait jours** are subject to *variable and longer working hours* with only vague protections, and receive *12 RTTs* per year, for a *loss of 6 days* before any *congé d'ancienneté* days are taken into account.



³ The AFP salary/minimum wage ratio has deteriorated considerably, see our analysis: <http://u.afp.com/wmDn>

- **Production journalists and managers who don't take the forfait jours** work 39 hours per week, receive 7 RTTs per year, for a loss of 11 days before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account.
- **Other journalists** (in particular those who work on the desks) **who did choose the forfait jours** work 35 hours per week with 4 RTTs per year, for a loss of 14 days before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account. The same is true for those on work-study programs.

Administrative Cadres (CA): they also had 44 vacation days and 18 RTT days. Those of them who opted for the forfait jours contract *lost 6 RTT days* before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account. Those who work on an hourly basis remain at 35 hours per week, but have *lost 14 RTT days* before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account.

Technical Cadres (CT): the technical staff are the big losers of the "Grand Accord" as the number of their vacation days was cut from 50 to 44, *a loss of 6 days*. In addition, there was a loss of RTT days before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account. The loss is *6 days* for the CTs on the forfait jours contract and *14 days* for the CTs who remain at 35 hours!

Press employees (EP): the EPs have remained at 35 hours, but were left with only 4 RTT days, i.e. *a loss of 10 days* before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account.

Laborers (OT): the other major losers, the OTs have seen the number of vacation days drop from 51 to 44, *a loss of 7 days*. They have stayed on a 35-hour work week, but *lost 10 RTT days* before any congé d'ancienneté days are taken into account.

This presentation does not take into account the situation of **expats** or the **transitional provisions** from which EPs and OTs hired before April 1, 2017 benefited. It should also be noted that for employees who are *not on a forfait jours contract, paid breaks have been reduced*. Finally, we do not elaborate on other points of the agreement which have a negative impact on working conditions, such as the increase of *on-call* time.

Career perspectives

While the **career plan** for *journalists* survived the general shift downward of the "Grand Accord", the same cannot be said for the automatic progressions enjoyed by *technical and administrative staff*. This concerns in particular the *laborers* as well as the *press employees*, who had a very protective career plan thanks to their 2007 strike.⁴

Journalists were not completely spared the cost-saving measures, however. The "Grand Accord" formalized many practices that management had previously imposed. For example: in the past, many journalists were promoted (their category increased) when they were appointed to a position of responsibility. The "Grand Accord" reduced the categories corresponding to such positions and introduced a complicated system to retain only part of the increase.

One of the most hotly debated issues in the negotiations on the "Grand Accord" was **expatriation**. AFP's greatest asset is its global network, which enables it to provide more international news than most competitors and media clients. For many journalists, the prospect of working abroad was one of the main attractions of a career at AFP. The only problem is that if the Agency is managed according to essentially financial criteria, **expatriation is a tremendous source of potential savings**. That is because expatriation under "headquarters status" is expensive, and employing staff under "local status" allows for significant savings.

The signatories of the "Grand Accord" crafted a provision they hoped would protect expatriation:

⁴ The 2007 career plan for EPs was based on *SUD's* propositions. See: <http://u.afp.com/32ZF>

"AFP undertakes to maintain a network of positions open to expatriates, at a minimum proportion of 28% of the number of "headquarters" journalists (with a permanent AFP contract under French law). AFP also undertakes to fill these positions with journalists of "headquarters" status, at a minimal level of 22% of the average, calculated over the last three years, of the total number of "headquarters" journalists (with a permanent AFP contract under French law)."

A sufficient guarantee? *SUD* had pointed out that this provision could be easily circumvented by lowering the number of headquarters status journalists. A hypothesis that was already foreseeable in 2017 and which became a reality under the Fries Plan... Moreover, management has not respected the 22% level and acknowledged it had not even implemented the minimum number of positions eligible for expatriation.⁵

We can, and we must do things differently!

The Grand Accord was supposedly meant to "simplify" the existing rules, but it mostly shaved off rights and benefits, created new inequalities and has itself become something of a new rat's nest, and we have already reached its 11th amendment...

Did AFP staff have no other choice than to accept the Grand Accord and suffer its consequences, as some have claimed? Was it, as the three unions which signed it have suggested, a "defensive agreement"? If so, it didn't work as management continued to impose new cost-cutting measures made at the expense of staff.

That is because soon **after the "Grand Accord" came the "Fries Plan"**, which the French state imposed in the 2019-2023 Aims and Means Contract with AFP. The "Fries Plan" called for a continued near-freeze of our wage scales, the elimination of headquarters status jobs and numerous "reforms" that negatively impacted our working conditions such as the reforms of the desks, the newsroom, the DSI, DRH... Not to forget the "voluntary departure plan" which thinned our ranks and the soon to be launched GPEC which may lead to more job losses.

SUD has regularly resisted these projects and demonstrated that they are linked to the *neoliberal* choices of successive French governments, the European Commission and our CEOs.⁶

***SUD* opposes the logic of "working more" and "earning less"**. We thus fought against the social regression of the "Grand Accord", and we support the call of national unions, political parties and associations that have advocated for a reduction of working time without a loss of salary.

In the 2018 staff election, one year after the signing of the "Grand Accord", ***SUD* took 17.37% of the vote**, compared to 11.15% in the previous election. A nice improvement, but still not enough to allow us to block the signing of new accords that degrade our working conditions. **Keep that in mind when the next staff elections are held in October.**

**Let's return to making social progress!
Help us strengthen union action!
Join *SUD*!**⁷

Paris, March 21, 2022
***SUD*-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)**



⁵ See our recent statement <https://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article664>

⁶ See our critique of the 2019-2023 Aims and Means Contract: <https://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article625>

⁷ Want to join *SUD*? - Here's how: <https://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article3>