

## AFP: Is it really a benevolent company?

AFP's management likes to present itself as benevolent towards staff. There are many examples of this, including in recent years, such as helping evacuated Syrian photographers make a new start in France or aiding our Afghan staff which needed to flee the returning Taliban. They demonstrate in action the values we profess as a company.

Unfortunately, there are times that make you wonder whether AFP's management is the Evil Queen rather than Snow White. Case in point: the 2023 firing of the local journalist trade union representative in our Lisbon bureau. An appeals court just ruled that the firing was illegal. AFP's justification for firing the journalist: he didn't respect the exclusivity clause in his contract. This is a fairly standard restriction employers impose on staff in many sectors.

Outside collaborations are fairly common in the media industry, however, and the issue is often regulated in national journalist conventions, including in France and Portugal. In general, we're supposed to inform AFP in advance, giving it the opportunity to object if it considers certain outside collaborations problematic, and never work for a direct competitor.

### A pretext for firing

However, the journalist in question was only working *part-time* for AFP and it knew from the start he was working for other French media that are our clients, not competitors. For SUD, the journalist's outside collaborations were only a pretext for getting rid of a trade union representative and we warned management at the time that it was skating on thin ice. But the case raised the serious question of how far an employer can go to limit the outside employment of a part-time employee. The Lisbon Appeals Court found that AFP overreached.

AFP now faces an important decision: accept the ruling or appeal. For SUD, an appeal to justify it can force part-time journalists to flip burgers instead of snapping pictures or conducting interviews on days they are not working for AFP would be simply malevolent. Not to mention that an appeal that could drag out a resolution for months or years would impose a further financial and psychological burden on a young journalist waiting to rejoin the Agency.

This case also clearly shows the brutal treatment local staff sometimes receive when they try to defend their rights. This brutality is also on display as management moves to implement its project to close the Middle East regional bureau in Nicosia. Last week the CSE temporarily blocked management's plan. French trade unions can only do that once, so management will likely force the plan through in November.

## The plane or the door

SUD considers management has provided no convincing financial reasons to quickly shut down the bureau where more than 70 people work. Completely shutting Nicosia makes sense to us only if management wants to get rid of many existing employees as they won't have the means to move the extended families that live with them to Paris or Dubai, or in a handful of casts, to Beirut. Management declined to share details of the packages that will be offered to Nicosia staff, which is inadmissible in our view. But it is clear many will face a choice of losing their jobs or accepting either a drop or living standards or living in a country at war. Yes, AFP can be a benevolent company, but it isn't always.

Paris, October 25, 2024

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

