

LIST SOS-AFP

1. Christian BIFFOT 2. Benoît CHATORRIER

AFP should serve the public interest (and nothing else)

Deutsch - Español - Français - Português - عربي : <http://u.afp.com/4nib>

We, employees of Agence France-Presse -- journalists, technicians and administrative staff, women and men, coming from nearly all the countries in the world -- are proud to work for a global news agency whose mission is to provide "*exact, impartial and trustworthy information on a regular and uninterrupted basis*" (Article 2 of AFP's statute).

AFP is unique

The AFP of today was created in 1957 by a law adopted by the French parliament. The principles enshrined in the law were visionary for their time and today they not only remain relevant, but are an urgent necessity. They are:

- AFP in its entirety is a public interest mission (and shouldn't be doing anything else).
- Information is a *right* (and not a product).
- He who pays doesn't decide (thus the French state, which provided a major portion of our budget, had only a minority position on the Board of Governors).
- AFP furnishes *services* (and not products) to its *users* (and not only to clients).
- AFP is not compelled to earn profits (it is not a regular private firm).
- AFP's budget should always be balanced (it should not have debts).
- AFP was created by a *law* (and shouldn't be dissolved except by another *law*).

These core values, which made AFP unique on the global stage, allowed it to emerge as a global news agency, to develop and to adapt to new technologies. But after lasting half a century, these core values were **ripped to shreds in a few years** by the current CEO Emmanuel Hoog under pressure from the French government and the European Commission:

- **Limitation of the public interest mission (2014)**: a decision of the European Commission, to which the French government and AFP's management clearly contributed, limited the agency's public interest mission to just part of its activity based on a temporary agreement with the French state which must be re-examined every 10 years. Thus AFP's public interest mission went from being *global* and *permanent* to *partial* and *limited* in duration. And AFP was compelled to develop activities that do not fall under its public interest mission.
- **Revision of AFP's statute (2015)**: this revision stripped AFP of the protection it had enjoyed from bankruptcy and placed it under the same rules for commercial firms, thus opening up the possibility the agency could be dismantled and/or sold off.
- **Giving up our equipment (2015)**: a debt subsidiary called AFP Blue was created via a toxic legal and financial operation. It now legally owns our equipment.
- **Signature of the Aims and Means Contract**: this contract forced AFP to make further savings, to favor supposedly profitable activities and prepare for a gradual reduction of state support.
- **Reduction of benefits (2015-2017)**: the negotiation of new collective bargaining agreement resulted in considerable reductions in wages and benefits for French employees without any improvements for employees on local and regional contracts. And without any prospect for improvements in the future.

All of these developments have been presented as being inevitable, when they are in fact the consequences of political and ideological choices which we oppose. They were all approved by the Board of Governors, on which the three staff representatives are in a minority against representatives of press groups, employers associations, and appointees of the French state.

Now AFP has money as its compass, and management's strategy is to find 1,000 new clients to allow the French state to reduce its support for the agency. Our new business model of tailoring our activities to clients and individuals who want to "*consume our products*" will land us in a price war with our rivals who are targeting exactly the same markets. That will lead to a spiral of cost-cutting to keep pace, to the detriment of wages and coverage, despite the agency's founding principles.

An alternative strategy

Faced with this dangerous development, we want to advance an alternative strategy to the decision-makers sitting the Board of Governors, one that seeks to address the immense need of citizens around the world for exact, impartial and trustworthy information.

In this regard, here are our main objectives:

- **Reinforce AFP's public interest mission**, which is the agency's only reason for existing. For a start, this means that the French state should pay the real cost that AFP incurs for carrying out the public interest mission it has been charged with, as EU rules allow. The Aims and Means Contract should be improved. The inevitable revision of how Europe operates should be seized as an opportunity to question the application of competition rules that limit public financing of AFP. The agency should be able to obtain sufficient funding to focus exclusively on its public interest mission and abandon purely commercial projects. And if the EU doesn't budge, the French government should rise to the values enshrined in the 1957 law and guarantee the independence of AFP against any ideological, political or economic groups.

- **Strengthen AFP's global character** while reinforcing its role as a francophone agency. Providing people around the world with information that is impartial, trustworthy and comprehensive evidently requires AFP to offer its services in the major languages. However this does not mean AFP should reduce the role of French, which in coming decades will become a more important language given the demographic growth in Africa.

- **Improve employee social benefits as well as democracy in the workplace around the world.** Management's current strategy will not only serve to accentuate divisions between staff on local and HQ contracts, it will put them in competition against one another. The number of HQ posts will drop as management shifts jobs abroad or converts posts to local status as it seeks to reduce costs. AFP needs to harmonize benefits for everyone by improving them.

The election of employee representatives to the Board of Governors is the only one conducted worldwide. The global nature of this election is the result of a favorable judgement by the French Constitutional Court in 2011 after a long legal battle waged by a trade union. The right to vote for all is something which should be defended at all costs. However the organization of the vote does not favor the active participation of local staff.

We demand an improvement of the organization of the vote and will defend the interests of all staff, whatever type of contract they are on and whatever their nationality. We call for a revision of the French government decree of 2015 on the organization of the vote as

it imposes anti-democratic rules that discredit the concept of “parity”. The most glaring example is the rules that prohibit us from presenting a list of a woman and a man in the college for technical and administrative staff.

This is the vision that all three of the employee representatives on the Board of Governors should defend. First of all within the body to which they are elected, but as AFP is an institution that serves the public interest, outside the agency as well. They should be advocates for AFP to politicians, trade unions, associations, and to the public as well. We want to work towards a refounding of the agency on a sound basis so it can fully play its essential role in democratic society, both in France and on a global basis.



1 Christian BIFFOT

Christian started his career with AFP as a technician for the central and west African region from 1993 to 2001, and has been working at the Paris headquarters since 2001. He participated in the recent labor relations talks as part of SUD’s delegation.

2 Benoît CHATORRIER

Benoît began working at AFP in 2002 as an employee in the payroll office. He was elected as a shop steward for SUD in 2007, and during his term was actively involved in the negotiations to improve the wage scale for employees. In 2008 Benoît became a cadre administratif in the payroll service. He was a negotiator for SUD in the labor talks.



In the electoral college for journalists, the SOS-AFP list headed by Samir DOUAIHY, Sandra LACUT, Richard LEIN and Paz PIZARRO is running on the same platform

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