

Behind the move: the DISMANTLING



The Agency is buzzing with rumors about moving our headquarters. Ahead of the meeting of the Board of Governors meeting on October 4 when our new CEO Fabrice Fries is expected to outline his plans, the move has become THE topic of discussion. Without feeding speculation, we'd like to take stock of the situation.

Why move? To do what?

Let's say it clearly: if Mr. Fries presents to staff a super-project for the development of the Agency including:

- refocusing on our public interest mission (information, and nothing but information!),
- an increase in staff and material resources,
- maintenance of AFP's logistical independence (technical and administrative services),
- a return to social progress (improving work conditions, general wage hikes, massive hiring under French contracts...),

...and it includes regrouping staff in a Paris building suited to the Agency's needs, then as part of such an inspiring project, why not?

But everyone knows this isn't the case: Mr. Fries' project, no matter what it finally entails, will undoubtedly mark an end to the era that began in 1956-1957, with the adoption of AFP's "Statute of Liberty", a project that was approved by a resounding majority in a staff referendum, which went along with the inauguration of a new headquarters on Place de la Bourse¹. While the 1957 project opened exciting perspectives and guaranteed the Agency's structural independence vis-à-vis the French state (which was then providing over 70% of its finances), **the Fries Plan won't contain anything attractive.**

Unify the newsroom? Of course!

Splitting the editorial services between the headquarters building and offices on Rue Vivienne, decided by Pierre Louette (CEO from 2005 à 2010), was an absurd move both organizationally and financially. That is now recognized by everyone. Apparently even by those who pushed it through and who, far from being penalized, have seen their careers take wing under successive CEOs.

Fabrice Fries' own statements (Le Figaro 2018-07-17) indicate a recourse to "selling" a possible move by promising Paris journalists to regroup them back in one building, like we have always demanded. **Will we be taken in by the wolf in sheep's clothing?** A move is not just a plan to rationalize our resources or improve the functioning of the newsroom.

A strategy of fear

Our CEO has a roadmap provided by Brussels: *permit the State to continue its budgetary reductions and further reduce its financial support for AFP, prepare the Agency for 2025*, the date when the European Commission plans to bulldoze the state aid that supports AFP by obliging the Agency to *function like any private firm*, which is guided uniquely by profit motives. (SUD has decrypted Fries' project here: <http://u.afp.com/oL7K>)

¹ See the book by J. Huteau and B. Ullmann on the history of AFP – Excerpt: <http://u.afp.com/1957>

These changes imply *a reduction in emphasis on activities that relate to the public interest mission in favor of more purely commercial activities*, with all sorts of marketing and corporate projects, partnerships and content sharing. These will all require shifts in staffing away from our current public interest mission, or even staff reductions to generate funds for investment. The new miracle product (after Pierre Louette's multimedia and Emmanuel Hoog's sport) is images, which given AFP's financial situation, cannot but be at the expense of text.

To advance with such a dubious project there is nothing better than **announcing a whole package of anxiety-provoking measures**:

- Massive redeployments
- Merging of desks
- The umpteenth restructuring of the technical services
- Threats to outsource administrative and technical functions
- Threats of job cuts
- Appointing a "cost killer" as the deputy to the CEO.

The possibility of a move could help the CEO **create a climate anxiety and resignation** necessary to push staff to leave "voluntarily" and those who remain to accept the project as *inevitable and inescapable*.

Another plus: all attention will be focused on a single issue, one that is both immediate and tangible, and not on the profound changes that are behind the project.

"Vigilance" isn't enough

The battle over "neighboring rights" is far from being won. No one is ready to predict what AFP might one day squeeze out of the internet titans. In the immediate future, the French draft budget law for 2019 doesn't include any significant gesture from the government, which has consistently underpaid for the public interest mission it gave AFP. That underfinancing comes to €17.9 million since 2015. The underfinancing is likely to only get worse given the **political choice** made by the government to squeeze public spending.

What does Mr. Fries propose? During a recent meeting with middle management, the CEO acknowledged that the Agency could turn to the French State with *a plan showing that AFP is making efforts* (more and more!!!!) and requesting that the government make an exceptional contribution. And - grab a hold onto your chair - **suggesting as a quid pro quo that the State reduce its compensation of the public interest mission!**

How generous our new CEO is! He certainly knows *staff have already made considerable efforts*. While staff haven't had a cost of living adjustment since 2012 we are still without answers about whether Mr. Hoog got raises. (*On that subject, Mr. Fries has rejected the recommendation of the CADA² to release information on the CEO's pay, so a SUD activist has filed a lawsuit to obtain transparency.*)

A move and dismantling threaten AFP. SUD is ready to participate in all joint efforts to oppose these projects and seek to ensure that this resistance isn't characterized as just a rear-guard effort by "those who don't want to move" (we remember all too well how those opposed to the move to Rue Vivienne were stigmatized³).

A move is about more than a building. Defend the unity of AFP, its material and human resources! Defend providing information that is both complete and pluralist! Defend our right to earn a decent wage!

Paris, October 1, 2018

SUD-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)



² See our article in French - <http://u.afp.com/oQ2b>

³ See our 2010 statement in French about Hoog's threat to resign to impose the move to Rue Vivienne: <http://u.afp.com/oLnL>