

## AFP should serve the public interest (and nothing else)

### Joint platform (journalists / technicians and administrative staff)

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 was re-founded in 1957 by a law adopted by the French parliament. The principles enshrined in the law were visionary for the era and remain not only relevant today, 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).
- Those who pay *do not 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 and which lasted half a century, were destroyed over a few short years by the current CEO Emmanuel Hoog under pressure from the French government and the European Commission:

- Limitation of the public interest mission (2014): by a decision of the European Commission, to which the French government and AFP's management clearly contributed, the agency's public interest mission was limited 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): via a toxic legal and financial operation a debt subsidiary called AFP Blue was created. It now legally owns our equipment.
- Signature of the Aims and Means Contract (2015): 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 of improvement.

All of these developments have been presented as being inevitable, when they are in fact they are 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 a spiral of cost-cutting to keep pace, to the detriment of wages and coverage, despite the agency's founding principles.

Faced with this dangerous development, we want to advance an alternative strategy to the decisionmakers 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 finance the entire cost of AFP's mission.

**> 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 the coming decades will become a more important language given the demographic growth in Africa.

**> Improve around the world employee social benefits as well as democracy in the workplace.** Management's current strategy will only serve to accentuate divisions between staff on local and HQ contracts, putting them into competition with 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 of everyone by improving them.

The election of employee representatives to the Board of Governors is the only one on a global scale. However the organization 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 that set the election rules, including farcical rules on parity.

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 in order to achieve a re-founding of the agency on a sustainable basis.■