

2000 against one

Munich (DK) At the embattled European Patent Office (EPO) the President is faced with support crumbling among the Member States, while outside 2000 employees are demanding his resignation.



Munich: 2000 against one

"Hands off our staff representatives", comes the demand from the employees of the European Patent Office in Munich, with loud calls for the resignation of President Benoît Battistelli. - Photo: Wenisch

Again and again Ion Brumme has to break off his speech. And again and again, some 2000 staff members who have gathered in front of the European Patent Office on the bank of the River Isar in Munich take up the chant: "Démission! Démission!", "Resign, resign", directed towards the EPO, one of the most important offices for the whole European economy, which for months has been threatening to descend into chaos.

The demand for resignation is very deliberately in French. The target is the French President of the EPO, Benoît Battistelli, who has made himself an enemy with many of the staff members, and is locked in a bitter power struggle with the staff union SUEPO. By now Battistelli has grown accustomed to the employees gathering to demonstrate against him – it has been a regular event for the last year and a half. But yesterday the demonstration had a particular significance.

Specifically, at the same time as the protests, in which more than half the 4000 or so EPO personnel who work in Munich took part, inside the building the Administrative Council of the Patent Organization was meeting. And it was a meeting fraught with tension; the fact that disagreements have arisen between Battistelli and the Administrative Council has suddenly been thrust into the spotlight. The support which the beleaguered President has been receiving from the supervisory body, in which the 38 Member States of the international organization

are represented, has plainly been shrinking over the past few months. There has even been speculation that Battistelli is seeking a golden handshake departure. Official comments on the outcome of the Administrative Council meeting, which lasts until today, are not expected until it has ended.

For Ion Brumme there is only one solution: "Battistelli is no longer to be tolerated!", and "Battistelli! It's time to go!", he calls out the crowd, and earns cheers and applause. Brumme is one of two leading staff union members and staff representatives who were recently thrown out by Battistelli. The revoking of the dismissals and an independent investigation into the accusations of bullying, which was the basis for the sackings, is only one of the demonstrators' demands. They also want an end to the monitoring, internal investigations to be conducted on the basis of national law, and no snooping on sick employees.

Elizabeth Hardon, the other union member to be sacked, is accusing Battistelli of seeking to split SUEPO. Personnel representatives from other EPO locations report that the Administrative Council is increasing the pressure on Battistelli. At the same time, statistics have been released which clearly express the anger of the employees. According to a staff survey, the proportion of personnel with psychological problems due to the pressure at work at the Office over the past three years has risen from two to eleven percent.

In the meantime the issue has also reached the level of Bavarian regional politics. Yesterday the Freien Wähler (Free Voters) tabled an emergency motion under the title of "Securing Bavaria's standards in employee protection in the whole of Bavaria: Make the European Patent Office meet its obligations!" in the Landtag, the regional parliament. In the motion they criticise the fact that within the EPO "there are manifestly substantial deficiencies" with regard to the attitude towards employees' rights. Protection of workers at the Bavarian level must be applied over the entire territory of the Free State, even if the Patent Office is an institution outside state control.

"Bavaria cannot stand idly by when human rights are being abused at the European Patent Office, with headquarters in Munich", says the social policy spokeswoman for the FW fraction, Gabi Schmidt. In particular, the internal investigation procedures in the EPO, at which the accused have no right of refusal to give evidence, are a thorn in the side of the FW members.

In the Patent Office, the demonstrations are seen as relatively harmless. The fact that they are allowed and are declared to be a basic right shows that a social dialogue is possible, at least according to the press office. The offer by the President to enter into discussions with the staff unions and SUEPO has been hailed as a chance to get back to the negotiating table. But with cries of "Démission!" coming from 2000 staff members at the same time, dialogue may be difficult to achieve.

Daniel Wenisch

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