

Patent office member states want just sanctions

Large majority votes for compromise on punitive measures

- Eppo König

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Benoît Battistelli, President of the European Patent Office Photo: Andreas Terlaak

The controversial punitive measures for employees of the European Patent Office, which has one of its branches in Rijswijk, will be reviewed. With 12 abstentions, 26 of the 38 member states of the office voted for fair sanctions in Munich on Wednesday, sources confirm.

The international organisation (7000 employees) approves patent applications and grants European patents. The position of the president of the office, Frenchman Benoît Battistelli (65), is under pressure due to his "authoritarian" management style. During a critical first meeting with State Secretary Martijn van Dam (Economic Affairs, PvdA - Dutch Labour Party) at the beginning of March, Battistelli left in anger, this newspaper reported on Wednesday.

The Administrative Council, the highest body that consists of the 38 member states, including the Netherlands, has major concerns about the dismissal and downgrading of three members of the union SUEPO and the works council. So far, Battistelli has shown himself to be largely unreceptive to this criticism. In leaked notes from February, the board of the Administrative Council describes the situation as "a crisis".

The council, which met in Munich on Wednesday and Thursday, previously wanted an external investigation into the punitive measures. In the current resolution, which was made public today, this demand has been watered down. Battistelli must now consider either an investigation or intervention through mediation or arbitration. The Administrative Council calls on the patent office *and* the union to resume the social dialogue and reach an agreement. The president has embraced the content of the resolution, according to the patent office.

As an international organisation, the patent office says it is not bound by national labour laws. Battistelli also does not recognise the union SUEPO, which represents half of all employees. The patent office has its own disciplinary procedures and an internal investigation department that screens employees. The working methods of the investigation department and the punitive measures will now be reviewed.

It is unclear what will happen to the union members who were punished due to a "damage campaign". The Dutch Chair of SUEPO in Munich, Elizabeth Hardon, was dismissed and had her pension docked. Her predecessor, Ion Brumme, was also dismissed and the treasurer of the union, Malika Weaver, has had her salary docked. Other members of the union have received official warnings.

Lawyer Liesbeth Zegveld for the union is calling on Battistelli to reverse the dismissals and downgradings. "Battistelli is abusing his authority and power if he decides to continue to punish the three union leaders in Munich," says Zegveld. "He is acting in clear contravention of the express wish of the member states to improve the social relations and protect the union here."