

European Patent Office agreement with union that represents 1 percent of staff

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After a year of negotiations, the criticised European Patent Office signed an agreement on official recognition of a trade union on Wednesday in Brussels. But this was not the largest union, SUEPO, which is refusing to sign in protest. The signatory is FFPE-EPO, which, with 75 members, represents 1 percent of the 7,000 employees.

Employees at the patent office, which grants European patents and is based in four countries, have been complaining for a long time about work pressure, intimidation by the management and restriction of their right to strike. Until now, the office has also not recognised any unions, since as an international organisation it supposedly does not fall under national labour laws.

Last year, the office did invite the unions to enter into a "social dialogue" which would lead to recognition. But SUEPO withdrew in June, when the patent office took punitive measures against three union leaders. Two of them were dismissed.

Last week, news leaked that the president of the office, Frenchman Benoît Battistelli, came into conflict over this with the administrative council, the highest body. The council has "serious concerns" about the punitive measures. The same week, Battistelli invited the unions to sign an agreement on recognition.

SUEPO, which represents almost half of the 7,000 employees, will not sign as long as its leaders feel "threatened and unlawfully persecuted". SUEPO considers it a "toothless agreement" without clear "rights and obligations".

Samuel van der Bijl, Chair of FFPE-EPO recognises that his union is small, but hopes to attract more members through the agreement. The agreement says nothing about the right to strike, but this is at the top of the agenda according to Van der Bijl.

The patent office says that it is one of the first international organisations to recognise unions. Battistelli has stated that he is open to "all themes" in relation to work.