

European Patent Office: Strike against dismissal of staff union members

A one-day walkout by staff members was aimed at having disciplinary measures against their representatives being revoked, as well as ensuring that a mediator would oversee future negotiations with the management.

In a poll taken at the beginning of March 2016, 91 percent of those involved voted for a [strike at the European Patent Office](#) (EPO), and the next day, Thursday, it happened. The staff union Suepo, which organized the one-day protest, is demanding as a priority the [immediate suspension](#) (PDF document) of the [disciplinary measures against three staff representatives](#). Two of them were suspended in January 2016, and a third demoted. Measures which the beleaguered President of the Office, Benoît Battistelli, took above and beyond the proposal by the Disciplinary Committee.

A further demand is for a truly independent institution to investigate the three cases. Up to now, disputes between EPO management and staff have been the prerogative of a disciplinary committee, with the President deciding alone on disciplinary measures. Because the Office is an inter-state institution, the employees are unable to have these decisions examined by any national courts. Their only means of recourse is the International Labour Organization (ILO), where proceedings drag on for years. The [ILO had already registered its unease in 2015 about the flood of complaints being received from the EPO](#) (PDF document) and demanded that the work situation in the Office be improved.

Even the Administrative Council is calling for improvement

These demands came at the most recent meeting of the EPO Administrative Council (AC), which, as the highest executive body, is intended, among other things, to oversee the President. For the first time, the Council openly showed [disapproval of Battistelli's behaviour](#) and called for changes to the staff regulations, in particular with regard to the EPO's internal investigation unit. This unit gathers evidence against staff members who are suspected of some shortcomings, which has already resulted in the installation of key loggers on publically accessible EPO computers.

Like the Administrative Council, the union is demanding fair dealings with the EPO management, under the observation of an internationally recognized moderator. Back in 2015 the AC was already insisting that Battistelli should come to an agreement with the union. Shortly before the last meeting in mid-March 2016, the Council presented the President with a "Memorandum of understanding". [But the contracting party was not Suepo](#), which represents 3400 of the 6000 employees; instead, it was the FFPE-EPO union, with fewer than 100 members. This PR trick did not fool the AC, though, and didn't satisfy it either. (ck)