

Settlement for former SUEPO leader, social tensions remain at the EPO

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Some positive news from the European Patent Office. Former Secretary of SUEPO The Hague and member of the Central Staff Committee Laurent Prunier, who was dismissed in 2016 on dubious grounds by former EPO president Benoit Battistelli, has reached a settlement with the Office, almost two years after António Campinos took over from his controversial predecessor. Unfortunately, Campinos has failed to end the social unrest of the Battistelli era.

The EPO's trade union announced the settlement in a letter to its members last week: "As you remember, numerous union officials and staff representatives were harshly targeted under Mr Battistelli's tenure. Following the mandate received from the Administrative Council, Mr Campinos has taken steps to provide relief to these colleagues. The latest in the series is Laurent Prunier, former Secretary of SUEPO The Hague and elected member of the Central Staff Committee, who was dismissed in 2016. (...) We are not privy to the settlement details, since strict confidentiality regulates it."



Prunier was fired in of a period of deep turmoil, protests and conflicts at the EPO during the presidency of Benoit Battistelli, who was accused of creating a climate of fear, putting workers under intolerable pressure and ignoring the organization's own rules. His controversial leadership led to parliamentary debates in the Netherlands, France and Germany, to a [conflict with the Dutch government](#) and dozens of court cases at the ILOAT, among others (see, for instance, [here](#) and [here](#)). Several cases of [suicide of staff members](#) were linked to the working conditions at the EPO.

According to Battistelli, Prunier had been harassing a colleague. But the dismissal was widely linked immediately to his activities for the trade union and the CSC. Two other SUEPO leaders were fired in 2016 as well, another was downgraded. Prunier has always denied any wrongdoing and asked for transparency: 'The easiest solution for the public to assess the truth vs. story-telling is for Mr Battistelli to lift the confidentiality he imposes on me and I will gladly publish all the documents', he wrote at the time in an open letter.

Although the settlement probably means the EPO has acknowledged Prunier should not have been fired, he will not return at the office, according to the SUEPO's announcement: "The ordeal, which has lasted more than 3 years, has severely impacted Laurent's life and health. In light of this impact, and in spite of having been a truly committed and valuable EPO colleague, Laurent chose not to return to the Office to be able to properly recover."

Since his start in office, almost two years ago, there has been pressure on Battistelli's successor António Campinos to settle the previous administration's sanctions against prominent SUEPO leaders. There is widespread disappointment ([read this blogpost for instance](#)) that it has taken so long to achieve this in cases like Prunier's and that some have still not been resolved. "We take this opportunity to recall that two former Staff Committee experts remain abusively sanctioned: Aurélien Pétiard in Munich and Michael Lund (now on pension) in The Hague. We hope that the President will finally provide relief to them, too", SUEPO wrote.

Also on other fronts the relation between the presidency and staff has not at all normalized, as was initially hoped after the leadership change in July 2018. Late last year, hundreds of staff members in The Hague and Munich protested against working conditions, for the first time since Campinos took office. According to them, he had failed to restore the social dialogue. They were particularly concerned about plans of the EPO to cut costs.

According to the Office the cuts are inevitable for the long-term financial sustainability. That conclusion is based on the **2019 Financial Study**, carried out by Mercer and Oliver Wyman. The study has been criticized from various sides - for more details see [this blogpost](#), but protests, criticism, alternative proposals nor recent discussions have led to rapprochement between presidency and staff. Nor has there been progress with the review of the social democracy framework.