

France: Le Monde journalists on strike

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16 April 2008

Staff at *Le Monde*, France's centre-left daily paper of record, went on a one-day strike to protest planned job cuts and the spinning off of several associated publications. About 100 employees of the corporate *Le Monde* Group demonstrated outside *Le Monde*'s headquarters in Paris.

Tuesday's edition of the paper did not come out after journalists walked off the job. At the same time, some employees of *Le Monde*'s web site *Le Monde Interactif* (www.lemonde.fr), a separate entity within the corporate *Le Monde* group, refused to update the site with articles from the print edition out of solidarity with their colleagues.

The 24-hour strike took place after *Le Monde*'s management announced a large-scale restructuring plan on April 4, eliminating 129 jobs—including 90 jobs in the newsroom, or one quarter of *Le Monde*'s journalists—in an effort to stem continuing losses and resolve the paper's indebtedness.

Eric Fottorino, a *Le Monde* editorialist who is CEO of *Le Monde* Group, told staff that the massive job cuts were the only way to keep the paper afloat. In an article published in the April 4 edition of *Le Monde*, Fottorino and his deputy David Guiraud wrote, "Rejecting [the plan] would deny us any chance of success and put the future of the group in peril."

The restructuring plan would also spin off "non-strategic" or loss-making publications included in the *Le Monde* Group, such as *Fleurus Presse* (a youth publisher), the *Editions de l'Etoile* (which edits the film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*), the monthly *Danser*, and the network of religious-themed libraries *La Procure*.

Christine Chombeau, *Le Monde* delegate for the National Union of Journalists (SNJ), told *Le Journal du Dimanche*, "We have unfortunately seen other restructuring plans, but each time, they were based on voluntary departures. Now, management is giving itself

the right to refuse voluntary departures and is considering involuntary layoffs from the outset. It is a total break with the habits of our firm."

An April 11 joint communiqué of the SNJ with the press federations of the CGT, CFDT, and CGC trade union confederations stated: "The worries of *Le Monde*'s employees is of a piece with those of an entire profession that is under attack in every publication. There is no publication that is not seeing job cuts, degraded working conditions, and economic pressure."

The trade unions also criticised management for "categorically refusing the idea of a reduction, even of a symbolic character, of the firm's top salaries."

In a general assembly on April 14, *Le Monde* voted a motion to negotiate a new plan with management. The motion passed overwhelmingly: 251 votes for, none against, with 4 abstentions. The motion also required management to abstain from involuntary layoffs and spinning off other corporate assets of *Le Monde* Group.

In an April 14 interview with AFP-TV, Fottorino replied he "understood the emotions felt by *Le Monde*'s staff, and even share it," but then announced that he was "determined" to carry out the original plan. He said it was his "responsibility to inscribe in this plan the possibility of forced layoffs," adding: "It is the success of this plan that will allow for the continued independence of *Le Monde*."

On April 15, employees at *Fleurus Presse* and *Télérama* met in general assemblies and voted to strike, beginning Thursday. There will be another assembly of *Le Monde* staff on April 16.

Fottorino's invocation of editorial and corporate independence as the motivation for laying off one quarter of *Le Monde*'s journalists is utterly cynical.

The paper's financial troubles are largely due to 150 million euros in debts, which the paper has acquired since *Le Monde* Group's initial public offering of stock in 2001, during a massive campaign of acquisitions of

other publications, publishers, and web sites. The Group posted a loss of 15.6 million euros in 2006 and 14.3 million euros in 2006. The paper's daily circulation was roughly 358,000 copies in 2007, down from 398,000 in 2003. It contributed 6 million euros to the *Le Monde* Group's 2007 losses.

In May 2007, the paper's then-CEO, editorialist Jean-Marie Colombani, was forced out by a vote of the committee of the newspaper's journalists, over opposition to Colombani's acquisitions strategy. As he left the group posting record losses, Colombani awarded himself a 950,000-euro bonus.

Lagardère Group—a conglomerate with interests in media, publishing, retail and aeronautics/defense, whose CEO Arnaud Lagardère is a close associate of President Nicolas Sarkozy—owns 17 percent of *Le Monde* Group and 34 percent of Le Monde Interactif. Business magazine *La Tribune* commented on April 14, "Lagardère Group...is at its wit's end. It does not hide its desire to take control of [*Le Monde* Group] with the Spanish firm Prisa (which owns 15 percent of *Le Monde*'s capital), if there is a further recapitalisation."

What is ultimately at stake in plans for large-scale layoffs at *Le Monde*—and the inevitable decrease in quality of the paper's coverage—is the loss of the paper's political independence and its conversion into a mouthpiece of the current leaders of the French political and corporate elite. *Le Monde* has until now presented a paradox: though a thoroughly establishment publication, it has retained a certain operational independence from the day-to-day propagandistic needs of the state.

It was founded in 1944 at the suggestion of Charles de Gaulle during the Liberation of France from the Nazis. It took over the office and presses of *Le Temps*, the former French newspaper of record, which had disgraced itself by its collaborationist line during the occupation. To head *Le Monde*, de Gaulle picked Hubert Beuve-Méry, a former *Le Temps* journalist who had joined the Resistance, after being for a time a teacher at Vichy's pro-fascist National School for Cadre at Uriage.

During the high tide of torture by French soldiers in Algiers during the Algerian War of Independence from France, *Le Monde* published the Report of the Commission to Preserve Individual Rights and Liberties, on December 14, 1957. In the following

years, Beuve-Méry and other editorial staff were repeatedly targeted for assassination. During the May-June 1968 struggles, *Le Monde* was popular with students, and its circulation hit a high of 800,000. After 1968, *Le Monde* transformed itself into a largely employee-owned company, with journalists, printers, and other employees holding 49 percent of the stock.

Le Monde backed Socialist President François Mitterrand (1981-1995) in presidential elections, but also later published an account of the sinking of a Greenpeace vessel on Mitterrand's orders in the 1980s, to prevent it from protesting French nuclear weapons trials.

Recent controversies over *Le Monde* have taken on an ever more bitter and more openly political character.

In 2003, Philippe Cohen and Pierre Péan published a long, right-wing denunciation of *Le Monde*—*La Face cache du Monde (Le Monde's Hidden Face)*—for betraying state secrets. Ultimately, this led in 2005 to the resignation of editorial chief Edwy Plenel, a former member of the pseudo-Trotskyist LCR (Revolutionary Communist League). Plenel and the LCR continue to have support inside *Le Monde*, however, notably in columnist Sylvia Zappi's promotion of LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot.

The year 2007 saw the ouster of Alain Minc, chairman of *Le Monde*'s supervisory board and a collaborator of Jean-Marie Colombani. Minc, not a *Le Monde* reporter, is a businessman and a graduate of the exclusive ENA National Administration School, made notorious for his 2001 conviction for plagiarism in his biography of Spinoza—*Spinoza, a Jewish Novel*. He is reportedly close to Sarkozy, who uses him as an advisor on media matters. In October 2007, Minc agreed to leave *Le Monde* after trying to force employees to keep him on as head of the supervisory board despite having failed to obtain the required number of votes.



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