France: Strikes continue at Le Monde

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For the second time this week, *Le Monde* staff, mostly journalists, went on a one-day strike Thursday to protest against management's large-scale restructuring plan. Due to the strikes on Monday and Thursday, *Le Monde*—the "paper of record" in France—did not come out on either Tuesday or Friday.

On April 4, *Le Monde*'s management announced a large-scale restructuring plan, eliminating 129 jobs—including 89 jobs in the newsroom, or one quarter of *Le Monde*'s journalists—and the spinning off of several associated publications, in an effort to stem continuing losses and pay down the paper's debts. These layoffs will be on a voluntary departures basis as well as forced layoffs, which have been categorically rejected by the journalists' union.

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.

On Wednesday, April 16, *Le Monde* Group CEO Eric Fottorino presented some more details on the effect the job cuts would have on the newspaper. They would eliminate 89 editorial or journalistic positions—45 full-time journalists, 16 full-time freelancers, 15 technical editors, and 13 administrative staff. The 40 remaining positions eliminated are in support staff for the paper's administration. According to press reports, most of the journalistic cuts would fall on the culture, sports, and economics sections, but all areas of the newspaper are expected to be affected.

Le Monde Group employees responded by voting 346 to 69 to continue their strike, to demonstrate their opposition to forced layoffs and to selling other companies in *Le Monde* Group. Since the conflict began, however, Fottorino and his deputy David Guiraud have maintained that they would not "go back on the principle of involuntary layoffs, or on the spin-offs," emphasizing *Le Monde*'s "very fragile economic situation."

On Thursday, *Le Monde* staff protested outside the paper's headquarters in Paris. They wore white T-shirts marked with numbers from 1 to 129 and shouted slogans like "No to Fottorino, no to Guiraud, 130 people out of work" and "No redundancies."

Other publications in *Le Monde* Group were also on strike on Thursday. *La Vie*, *Courrier International* and Fleurus Presse—a publishing house that puts out 12 youth titles and employs 85 people—protested the proposed spin-offs, with *Télérama* employees going on a solidarity strike for Fleurus Presse workers. Fleurus Presse workers extended their strike until Friday, while *Télérama* employees voted 96-38 to return to work, while voting 136-5 to continue their "movement in support of Fleurus Presse."

Employees at *La Vie*, *Courrier International*, and *Télérama* had already struck last week in protest against Fottorino's refusal to let them publish an article explaining their opposition to management's proposals.

Le Monde Group management has not yet issued precise figures on the costs and savings of the proposed plan, deepening employee suspicions.

Télérama employees issued a statement with three demands: abandoning plans to spin off Fleurus Presse, preparing a financial rescue package with the "necessary seriousness and sincerity" and "giving the Group estimates of the real cost of the spin-offs." They added that management's propositions had amounted to a "dilatory manoeuvre not corresponding to any of the workforce's requirements," and added that "on the basis of the data at their disposal," the spin-off of Fleurus is a "bad decision." They also announced their intention to issue a new strike warning should management not give "a clear response to the three demands in the beginning of [next] week."

The all-union federation of the magazine section of *Le Monde* Group said in the statement that management's guarantees on the conditions of sale of Fleurus Presse were inadequate, adding that it would accept "no spin-off or layoffs until transparency has been made on the totality of the Group's losses, including the salaries and perks of leading executives." It requested that general assemblies of employees of each company "choose the most appropriate methods of action, including strike action and not publishing titles."

CEO Eric Fottorino penned an editorial in Friday's edition of the paper, in which he set out to justify the job cuts. His main argument was to note the consequences of the world financial crisis on advertising revenue: "In 2001, our advertising revenues reached a record level of 100 million euros. Our staff fights today to keep revenues barely above 50 million euros. Never, in the last 60 years, has advertising revenue been so weak on the other side of the Atlantic, where they have fallen 10 percent. The subprime crisis and the noticeable slowdown in economic growth have propagated these shock waves over to us."

He also noted growing competition for readership and advertising money with the Internet and dailies—such as *Vingt Minutes*, *Métro*, and *Direct Soir*—which survive on advertising revenue and are distributed free of charge in subway stations and other public places. He said that, after the job cuts, *Le Monde* coverage would be "denser, more selective, aiming for explanation, analysis, and diversity of points of view rather than simply retelling news."

Ultimately, however, his main justification was this: "Only by a vigorous and quick financial rescue can *Le Monde* have a serious chance of maintaining its independence." This comment was a rather elliptical reference to the possibility that *Le Monde*'s major corporate stockholders—notably Lagardère Group and its Spanish corporate partner, Prisa—could significantly increase their influence at *Le Monde* if financial difficulties compel *Le Monde* Group to sell them more stock. This would be particularly damaging to the paper's credibility, as Arnaud Lagardère is well known to be personally and politically close to President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Fottorino's appeals to *Le Monde*'s "independence" and to its much-touted tradition of analysis over simple reporting are, however, entirely hypocritical. He is part of a team of editorial columnists who has come out ever more openly in favour of Sarkozy's right-wing reforms, and he took the CEO position last year thanks to his connections to its corporate shareholders.

Le Monde's editorialists have consistently taken a stance as advisors to Sarkozy on how to carry out his anti-social reform program. They greeted his election as president last May with an editorial titled "How to make rupture work," (echoing Sarkozy's campaign slogan of sharp change in social policy) in which it hoped that Sarkozy's cuts would "put France back on the path to dynamism." It opposed Sarkozy's September 2007 budget on the grounds that it did not sufficiently "symbolize the 'rupture' recommended by Sarkozy" and that it put off "painful choices" on Social Security reform.

As he made clear in a February 26 interview with the conservative news magazine *L'Express*, Fottorino's main concern is that readers should not see *Le Monde* as too closely associated to the interests of its corporate stockholders. He told *L'Express*: "Clearly no stockholder can become dominant. If one of them could say, '*Le Monde* is mine,' it would be very problematic. We must imperatively keep our independence. It's a question of our brand name and our credibility. But there is still room for more participation by stockholders without putting our identity in question. You know, I'm not trying to make Lagardère into some sort of devil."

Noting that *Le Monde* employees—who own a large block of stock in *Le Monde* Group—had recently voted to oust pro-Sarkozy businessman Alain Minc from his position at the head of *Le Monde*'s supervisory committee, Fottorino added: "Everyone has to play their role, including the Society of Journalists [at *Le Monde*]. I am completely willing, of course, to listen to its representatives, but as one stockholder among many and not more than the others."