



Home Leave: a new attack on our working conditions

Summary

The Administration has put its ["improvements" to the home-leave](#) on the agenda of the meeting of the General Advisory Committee scheduled for 20 February. In brief: the reduction in the amount of reimbursement will be greater than 10% for two thirds of concerned staff, some losing up to 70% of their reimbursement; and colleagues with an intercontinental background will be either denied home leave or be assigned a home leave destination where they have no family. The total savings for the Office will amount to about 700 000 € per year. To add insult to injury, this proposal follows on the heels of four meetings of a working group on home leave, where – as is now evident – the points put by the staff representation were ignored completely. The readiness of the Administration to ride roughshod over the consultation process in such a blatant way on a relatively minor issue sends a stern warning to us all as we prepare for an important year ahead.

Background

Circular 22 states that staff travelling to a home leave destination in Europe more than 500 km from the place of employment will receive a lump sum payment calculated as 50% of the business fare for the respective air route, plus a kilometric allowance for the land part on the journey. This is then multiplied up according to the number of people travelling, with a lower payment for children under 12.

Following a proliferation in the number of Business Class tariffs, the Office quietly changed their practice in the summer of 2012, drastically reducing reimbursements for home leave. When staff noticed, they complained and the Central Staff Committee took up the matter with the President.

After [the initial denial of PD 4.3 that something had changed](#), the President, who appeared to have understood the problem [ordered the new practice to be stopped immediately](#) and convened a working group to review the home leave refund conditions.

The President mandated the Working Group to look at the definition of "Business class" to aid the interpretation of the lump sum payment described in Circular 22. He also included in the mandate a request for the group to look at possible alternatives to the existing system of reimbursement based on the Business class fare.

Working Group on Home Leave – a promising start and a disappointing end

The Working Group on Home Leave, which included four members nominated by the Central Staff Committee had four meetings in the last quarter of 2012. In promising start, the President's nominees in the Working Group explained that the goal was not to reduce the overall amount refunded to staff on account of home leave but to tackle its apparently wild increase. The group rapidly agreed several points:

- the destination airport should not be further than 100 kilometres away from the home destination whenever possible.
- the purpose of home leave (defined in the ILO case law) is to help maintain the family and social links for staff members working in another country.
- nobody should be deprived from their right to home leave.
- the goal was to provide a fair deal such that hardly no one would be significantly disadvantaged by any new regulation.

After what seemed like open discussions, the group formulated a tentative definition of "Business class" as follows: "the cheapest available fully flexible business class fare".

They then carried out a simulation of the reimbursements based on the home leave taken by staff in 2011. The result was disastrous with massive imbalances appearing throughout the results. Sadly, the President's nominees in the Working Group seemed unwilling to discuss the evident anomalies and instead of looking at well-meant counter-proposals from the Staff Representatives, they decided to press on with "their" definition. The President's nominees then wrote a report and recommendations for the President without any further discussion with the Staff Representatives and without even sending them a copy.

The proposal on the GAC agenda – even worse than expected!

It was not really a surprise that the Administration decided to stick to the very silly definition of "Business class" as described above. There was a certain inevitability in the stubbornness of the President's working group nominees. What does it matter to the Administration that someone in The Hague who takes home leave in Munich gets EUR 384.31, while staff in Munich who take home leave in The Hague get EUR 620.81? Or that someone travelling from Vienna to Edinburgh gets EUR 484.46, while someone travelling from Munich to Edinburgh, a shorter trip, gets EUR 869.62? Yes, we expected stubbornness and administrative efficiency to take priority over fairness for the Administration.

What we didn't expect was for the proposal going to the GAC to abolish home leave outside Europe! There are, according to the GAC document, 130 colleagues who are nationals of non-member states of the EPO and who have until now been able to visit family and friends every two years with the travel expenses paid. This very reasonable practice is completely cut in the proposal on the GAC agenda for 20 February.

Most grotesque working group ever?

It saddens us to have invested so much effort into a working group and to see that the effort was so pointless. Reading [Presidential Communiqué n°19](#) (addressing projects on the HR roadmap), we thought we had good reason for optimism:

This has been done in full transparency, regarding objectives as well as methods, and with a specific emphasis on consultation with the staff representatives.

Despite the grand words, the working group may have been the most grotesque one ever: it led to a report drawn by the single hand of someone in the administration; neither the working group members nominated by the staff representation nor the staff representation had a chance to read the

report; in a meeting with the CSC on 17 January, the President admitted a clear failure (*c'est un raté*); nevertheless a document has been tabled for the GAC that diverges with the outcome of the working group.

The Administration is making every effort to give the impression that the working group members nominated by the Staff Committee agreed with the final proposal. They did not. And they stressed this in a series of e-mails to the entire working group after the final meeting.

Conclusion – a sad outcome and a warning of worse to come

What we don't understand is why the President and the Administration are making such a big deal out of an issue that concerns less than 0.04% of the EPO's yearly budget. They went to the trouble of setting up a working group and then ignored all the input and positive effort. They then pretend that true consultation has taken place, when it absolutely has not.

At this stage, there are only two possible outcomes: either the common sense prevails and this proposal is swiftly withdrawn or the administration remains dogmatic and tries to put it into force. In the latter case, mass appeals will be unavoidable but will not suffice. The lack of timely access to a court means that many staff will be long retired when they finally win. Unfortunately other means will have to be used in order to make the Administration understand that it is taking a very wrong path.

What staff can do under these circumstances is to:

- try to take home leave before April 2013
- check carefully the reimbursement and compare it to previous payments, protesting with copy to the Staff Committee whenever the reimbursement is not satisfactory (you can check current prices for fully flexible business class at <http://matrix.itasoftware.com>)
- where there is no business class available on the routing to the home leave destination, contact your staff representatives for advice

The Staff Representation will be drafting internal appeals, including one for staff whose home is outside Europe.

We will try for a last time to persuade the Administration to become more reasonable. In case of failure, we will organise the necessary next steps to defend staff's interests. Meanwhile, we must all take this extraordinary story as a warning and start getting ready for worse to come. 2013 will see discussions on the salary method, sick leave, promotions and reporting. If the Administration cannot behave fairly on a simply technical, and relatively minor issue like home leave, what are we to hope when the topics get really important?

The Central Bureau of SUEPO