

Thursday 28 January 2016, 6:17am

Employees protest against ‘intimidation’ at European Patent Office

RIJSWIJK - Employees of the European Patent Office (EPO) in Rijswijk are taking to the streets on Thursday afternoon. The employees are protesting against the poor work atmosphere within the company and the culture of ‘fear and intimidation’, as some describe it.

An immediate cause for the protest is the dismissal of two colleagues and the demotion of a third. The location of the patent office in Rijswijk is the largest international organisation in the Netherlands, with around 2,700 employees.

Those who were fired and demoted work at the EPO headquarters in Munich. They all work for the organisation’s own union. Last week, the sanctions led to a major protest in Germany, with an estimated 1,300 participants. But the upheaval has now reached Rijswijk as well.

Consequences

The staff claims that the punished employees are facing the consequences of the fact that they dared to criticise the ‘tyrannical’ head of EPO, Frenchman Benoit Battistelli. One of the fired employees is the Dutch chair of the union, Elizabeth Hardon. “It’s outright intimidation,” says the union’s lawyer Liesbeth Zegveld.

An EPO spokesperson says that Battistelli is in the middle of a major reorganisation to modernise the company. “And of course, that can lead to reactions among the staff. Everyone has trouble with changes.” He also says that the head of the company would very much like to enter into a dialogue with the employees to repair the relationship.

Governments have to intervene

Thursday’s protest march will go from the French to the German embassy in The Hague. The disgruntled employees hope to get the governments of both countries and that of the Netherlands to intervene.

Employees of EPO in Rijswijk speak of [a ‘culture of fear’ within the company](#). People are only willing to speak out anonymously, for fear of reprisals. They are saying that people who like posts on Facebook that criticise the organisation, for example, can count on sanctions. ‘Censorship, threats. Working here is no fun anymore,’ one of them says.

‘No culture of fear’

The EPO spokesperson denies the culture of fear. He says the company will not accept that people who have great working conditions speak poorly of the company they work at.

The Dutch cabinet has yet to make a clear [statement on the issue](#). In response to questions from the House of Representatives, Minister Lodewijk Asscher (for Social Affairs and Employment, and member of the PvdA (Labour Party)) previously underlined that part of the

problem is that the board of management of the European Patent Office has legal immunity. That means, among other things, that the Dutch Inspectorate SZW cannot be granted access to the offices in Rijswijk as long as Battistelli does not allow it.

Cabinet must take action

The PvdA and SP (Socialist Party) in the Dutch House of Representatives want State Secretary Martijn van Dam (for Economic Affairs, and member of the PvdA) to take action. He is to mediate and meet with his European colleagues to make sure the ‘legal loophole is closed,’ according to MP Sharon Gesthuizen (of SP).

The European Patent Office is currently building [a new office in Rijswijk costing €205 million](#). Prime Minister Rutte helped Battistelli lay the first stone in the summer of 2014. Protestors also marched in Rijswijk when the first post was driven into the ground.
By: The Editors