



Letter to Commissioner Hahn and Commissioner Simson on the critical situation in Fusion for Energy

Monday, January 17, 2022

Dear Commissioner Hahn, dear Commissioner Simson,

We would like to draw your attention to Fusion for Energy (F4E), the “European Joint Undertaking for ITER and the Development of Fusion Energy”, based in Barcelona.

ITER is the world’s largest energy research project with the participation of 7 international partners (China, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and the European Union). The EU is the most important stakeholder in ITER, leading the project, providing almost half of its components, and paving the way for making fusion energy a reality by the second half of the century. F4E was set up by the Council in 2007 to provide the European contribution to the ITER project for the next 35 years and to develop fusion energy through several other projects in cooperation with Japan.

The promises of fusion energy, the significant financial resources contributed by the EU (in the order of more than 12 € billion) as well as the EU leadership in this high visibility international venture make it absolutely necessary for European institutions to ensure the reputation and success of the project.

The F4E Joint Undertaking is key to delivering the European contribution and the overall success of the ITER project. Unfortunately, F4E’s performance is hampered by a deteriorating work environment, putting at risk the EU contribution and success of the project.

Many negative signals of the unhealthy situation in Fusion for Energy have been emerging over the last few years: the Court of Auditors openly criticized in its 2018 and 2019 reports the appointments of two senior managers, highlighted possible conflicts of interest and other serious weaknesses in its management. While F4E has implemented actions plans, apparently “ticking” all the right boxes, the real situation in the organization has been constantly deteriorating. Successive management assessments in 2019 and 2020 and several internal surveys highlighted repeatedly the enormous workload and pressure on staff, the disproportionate use of external resources undermining the long term sustainability of the organization, the lack of trust in the Director and the Senior Management, the dysfunctional and non-transparent internal decision-making, and the overall weak management practices.

In May 2021, a staff member - a brilliant young Italian engineer named Mario Gagliardi – took his own life denouncing, in his last letter to his family, the work pressure and unhealthy working environment in F4E. A technical audit of the work of his team had been undergoing for more than 15 months, giving to

many the feeling that it was more about finding scapegoats than identifying the root causes. This audit – known internally as “deep dive” - was accompanied by a far-reaching reorganization, including the appointment of an interim manager in an ad hoc way with the mandate to “clean-up”. Messages from the trade unions, the staff committee, and Mario’s previous manager alerting the Director, the Head of HR and the responsible Head of Department on the delicate situation of Mario and the general unease with the deep dive were simply ignored.

The tragic loss of a staff member’s life triggered several dramatic events which have led the organization to an extremely fragile and highly unstable situation.

Following the demand of all three unions present at F4E, the F4E Governing Board and the Commission launched a preliminary assessment of the events that led to the death of Mario, with the objective of identifying any individual responsibilities and to assess whether there was any link with the professional environment at F4E. This preliminary assessment was poorly steered by the governance bodies leading to contradictory and non-credible conclusions, openly disputed by staff and by those who had witnessed the events firsthand.

Following a General Assembly of F4E staff which took place on 9 November 2021, the following resolution was adopted by a large majority (through a secret ballot):

1. F4E staff express their deep disappointment for the way the preliminary assessment to the inquiry for the tragic loss of our colleague Mario Gagliardi was conducted, and in particular the failure to provide clear conclusions on the F4E professional environment
2. F4E staff questions the conclusions of the preliminary assessment to the inquiry, which does not take into account the continuous degradation of the F4E working conditions, and express their concern that this situation will continue and may affect more staff
3. F4E staff has decided to call for a strike as a means to protest against these events
4. F4E staff has decided to ask the representatives of the three trade unions present at F4E (US, R&D and U4U) to bring the concerns of Fusion for Energy to the attention of the political authorities in Brussels and discuss with them how to improve the situation in the organisation
5. F4E staff has decided to ask the F4E Staff Committee and the trade unions to explore the possibility of launching their own independent study to look into the root causes of the deplorable professional environment in F4E

This resolution was communicated to the F4E administration and the members of the F4E Governing Board, and a strike was called for the morning of 24 November 2021.

The participation of staff in both the General Assembly and the subsequent strike was massive, underlining the concerns and outrage of staff in front of the difficult moments facing the organisation, but also of the commitment of the staff to move forward and work together to improve the F4E professional environment.

Despite the strike and the dramatic events leading to it, the response from the Governing Board and the Commission fell short of staff expectations of what is needed to reach a closure of this painful chapter and to inject a renewed morale in the organization. The Governing Board endorsed the controversial preliminary assessment report and proposed clearly insufficient measures to improve the working environment by “exploring the opportunity to set up an independent listening room for staff”, by “encouraging the Commission to explore which independent instances could help in analysing F4E’s working environment” and finally by preparing to have a member of the GB to advise the Director on administrative and organisational decisions for a period of 12 months, in particular linked to personnel decisions.

On the one hand, this so-called preliminary investigation whose terms of reference were not even clear, conducted by these “experts”, demonstrates beyond any doubt that it is no longer tolerable to allow European bodies such as F4E to carry out in this way such complex investigations that should be in any case entrusted to fully independent bodies and to professional specialists. On the other hand, the publication of the conclusions of this so-called preliminary investigation immediately provoked strong reactions not only from F4E staff but also from a number of colleagues who saw their testimony not being duly taken into account, above all with regard to the responsibilities they had clearly indicated.

Meanwhile, the situation in F4E remains unsettled: The Director and Senior Management seem unable to steer the Joint Undertaking in the direction of a change, F4E appears like a drifting boat with the only aim to stay afloat, while the same management behaviours and practices continue.

As a consequence of the above events, we feel the obligation to alert you on the risks of this situation for the proper functioning of the Joint Undertaking, the wellbeing of its staff and the reputation of the EU in the ITER project.

In this context, we ask the Commission to:

- a) Support that OLAF launch an inquiry into the F4E professional environment to determine clear responsibilities (if any) linked to the tragic loss of our colleague. OLAF possesses both the professionalism and necessary independence for a credible and undisputable outcome.
- b) Perform an in-depth assessment of the current F4E Senior Management, in particular in relation to their credibility and capacity to implement, in the present context, a change programme capable to restore trust and to transform the F4E working environment and corporate culture
- c) Redefine its own relationship with the Joint Undertaking, going beyond the current supervisory and non-constructive approach and restore the initial partnership where Commission and Joint Undertaking worked hand-in-hand to identify and resolve issues. Unless the original relationship style is renewed, Euratom will most likely fail in leading the ITER project and will become a liability for the reputation of the EU.
- d) Ensure that the Joint Undertaking is provided with realistic objectives and with the human resources which correspond to the tasks assigned to it, to ease the unsustainable workload and

the unhealthy stress caused by unrealistic expectations. This will restore the ability of the Joint Undertaking to meet the challenges ahead.

All the above are necessary conditions to move into a new era of collaboration, putting the project and the people at the heart of this adventure.

We are looking forward to a constructive discussion to contribute to the creation of a healthy working environment in F4E avoiding further casualties.

We remain at your disposal for any clarifications and exchanges.

Brian Macklin, President EPSU

Cristiano Sebastiani, President R&D

Georges Vlandas, President U4U



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