The lessons of a crisis

Problem solved - all interpreters working under the AIIC/EU agreement are once again on an equal footing.

Edwin GOOSSENS VAEREWYCK.
Published: May 13, 2000 Last updated: December 2, 2015

After 20 months of bitter conflict, we have finally won. Equality has been re-established amongst all interpreters in the European Union Sector and an agreement, which governs our relations with the EU institutions, has been adopted.

Now the time has come to turn the page and envisage a brighter future, free of much uncertainty. But before turning the page, I think it is appropriate to draw some lessons from these 20 months of crisis.

The first lesson is that solidarity is fundamental to seeking solutions and obtaining results. We know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that had freelance interpreters not been able to count on the unconditional and constant support of our colleagues, the staff interpreters, members and non-members of AIIC, we would have neither an agreement (entry into force 1/9/99) nor a return to equal working conditions for all freelance interpreters working for the EU institutions (entry into force 27/3/2000). Twice the staff interpreters created strong momentum for our negotiations: first, at the General Assembly of Commission and European Parliament staff interpreters in spring 1999 and subsequently through three one-hour work stoppages at the EU Council of Ministers in spring 2000. We must pay tribute to our Commission staff colleagues, who not only stopped working in support of our demands, but also distributed tracts to delegates and went into the meeting rooms to inform the meeting chairmen that a strike action was going to take place during the course of the day. It is true that our staff colleagues could be said to be vulnerable to the same manoeuvres as freelance interpreters. Therefore, it was logical for them to support us and to expect to receive our support later on. So much the better! Let us never forget that we enjoyed their support.

Speaking of solidarity, I think it is appropriate to salute the efforts of the numerous colleagues who work at the Commission and who decided to decline all offers of work there starting in September 1998. Recognition also goes to those colleagues who, despite the constraints of their personal lives, were able to cut back considerably on the amount of work they accepted. The financial sacrifice was very real, and not all of them -- far from it -- work at the European Parliament or on the private market. I think that we should all congratulate ourselves for having made these efforts and sacrifices.

Continuing on the subject of solidarity and before turning the page, I cannot refrain from mentioning those colleagues who did not feel it was useful to demonstrate solidarity and who, on the contrary, rushed to accept as much work as they could. In particular I have in mind those colleagues who, a few months earlier, were spared the effects of an unfair decision (removal from the SCIC freelance list at the age of 65) through the efforts of the Negotiating Delegation and yet, did not hesitate for even a moment to fill the booths in large numbers during the crisis; in addition, there were those who showed a lack of good judgment by undermining the efforts and sacrifices of so many colleagues.
This was neither right, nor moral, nor ethical.

The other lesson we must learn from this crisis is that we can never take anything for granted. AIIC, as the organisation representing all conference interpreters (members and non-members), was threatened by various manoeuvres, the objective of which was to show that AIIC was not representative. I am referring to the AMI episode (the call for an expression of interest) and the extremely dubious way the partner institutions carried out this exercise. Fortunately, here too, we were able to show and convince the other players accepted in the AMI context that the best solution for the profession as a whole was for AIIC to negotiate on behalf of all the conference interpreters (members and non-members), as it had done for the previous 30 years. We made a convincing case and obtained a mandate from the other groups to negotiate on their behalf as well. Then, having avoided this pitfall, the negotiations began with our negotiating partners making farfetched proposals (e.g. "beginner" status for 1600 days! "local" status within a radius of 120 km from the place of work). With the support of the sector and exercising great patience and tenacity, our Negotiating Delegation was able to guide the proposals on these points toward solutions more in conformity with the "acquis" of over 30 years of AIIC/EU agreements.

We now have an agreement that is unlimited in time (a first in the history of agreements with the large institutions); thus there is less risk of complete dismantling of the "acquis" by the institutions. Another feature of this agreement is that any request to renegotiate must be made by at least two of the parties. This means that the two parties in question must first reach agreement with each other in order to be able to request the opening of negotiations. This mechanism implies that no single institution can try, on its own initiative, to dismantle what is deemed acceptable by the other parties (both the interpreters and the other signatory institutions for example).

At long last, the re-establishment of equal working conditions for all colleagues -- in all of the institutions -- was confirmed in recitals to the rulings of the Court of First Instance of the Court of Justice of the European Union. Equality has thus been confirmed and enshrined in the case law of the Court of Justice!

During this difficult period many colleagues decided to apply for membership in AIIC, thus strengthening our organisation in its vital role as representative of conference interpreters. We must thank the EU Sector, which responded positively and massively to the many calls for sectoral meetings (about 15) and requests for assistance with sometimes thankless tasks (frequent posting of information and invitations to attend, registration at sectoral meetings).

Finally, let us once again pay tribute to the members of our Negotiating Delegation, who could not have known, when they were elected two and a half years ago, just how lengthy and arduous the coming negotiations would be (even though no agreement negotiations have ever been easy). I would like to acknowledge their unremitting efforts, their tenacity, their skill at listening to and analysing all points of view and their strength and courage in the face of what could only have been some very unpleasant situations. Thank you Anne Thoen, Cecilia Rydbeck, Elisabetta Colle-Zanca, Greta Stichelmans, Isabelle Lebon, Willy Visser and Phil Smith.

Recommended citation format: