

UGS report to the FSE

March 28, 2009

The past year has been the worst in the French guild's history. Much of its energies has been spent dealing with the fallout from the French president's decision to scrap advertising on the state-owned television channels. The decision was originally presented as a way of freeing programme-makers from commercial constraints, but the no doubt deliberate inadequacy of the measures taken to replace the funding from advertising has had the result of spreading creating uncertainty and despondency among the creative community, in particular the makers of fiction programmes.

The dust has yet to settle completely, but it's been clear for at least a year that budgets are being cut back with a consequent reduction in the volume of fiction produced, and therefore less work for writers, with less pay, and in a climate of greater insecurity.

The guild's beleaguered executive was gratified to receive messages of support from the British guild and the FSE, but there was never any doubt that the reforms would be steam-rollered through. In the *sauve-qui-peut* atmosphere generated by the reforms, the guild's relations with its regular partners - the producers and the directors - have gone into decline, with UGS suspending its participation in the TRIO, a standing working group it formed with these partners five years ago, on the grounds that it wasn't actually working.

In this changed landscape, the UGS has launched a series of regular meeting with the leading producers association, the USPA, with a view to updating the code of conduct drawn up in 2001, and also with the SPI, the independent producers association, to discuss working relations with the broadcasters. Negotiations are also ongoing with the SACD in which our guild is resisting a bid by the directors' guild to increase their share of secondary rights at the expense of the writers. In all these talks we have been joined by the Club des Auteurs, an association of writers formed by a breakaway group nearly a decade ago with whom we are engaged in a process of rapprochement. Early talks have begun with a view to forming some kind of screenwriters' federation.

The UGS has strengthened its external representation with the appointment, initially part-time, of a déléguée générale, or executive director, Isabelle Le Guern. To offset the increase in the payroll we are in the process of moving to slightly smaller premises.

Our paid staff includes a full-time secretary and cultural events coordinator whose main task is to organise our presence at Cannes and other festivals. Our magazine Scénaristes, formerly La Gazette des Scénaristes, also employs a part-time secretary. (The magazine, incidentally, in increasing its periodicity from four to six issues a year).

To diversify our sources of income, we have applied to an organisation called SCAM - the collecting society for documentary filmmakers, to which a number of our members belong - for a subsidy that would complement that which we receive from the SACD.

We continue to attract new members at only a marginally faster rate than we lose old ones, so that our membership remains slightly under the 200 threshold. Of these, roughly three quarters work mainly in television and one quarter regard themselves as writers for cinema.

In addition to defending and promoting writers' interests among our professional partners in general, the UGS continues to offer its members as wide a range of services as its slender resources allow, including debates and other social occasions, legal advice, mediation, information on access to training courses and so on.

A new initiative in 2008 which unfortunately cannot be renewed this year was the organisation, jointly with the FSE, of a European best screenplay festival, staged at a private cinema in Grasse, coinciding with the nearby Cannes festival. Audiences were somewhat sparse, this being a first run, but the format was felt to be viable with potential for expansion. However the cinema owner has since moved elsewhere and the festival, if it is to be renewed, will need to find a new home. This obviously would not necessarily have to be in France.