

NEW LAWS IN ITALY CURTAIL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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In the wake of recent developments in the Italian Parliament, protests are breaking out across the nation at universities and public research institutes.

For many years, the Italian research system has been plagued by scarce funding and government-imposed hiring limits. Legislation enacted by Parliament in August (L133/08) has pushed the system towards the point of collapse. University funding will be reduced by nearly a billion euros between 2009 and 2012, and permanently reduced by 455 million euros per year thereafter¹ (corresponding to about 6% of the 7.5 billion euro outlay for 2008). New hiring limits will allow the replacement of only one university staff member for every five lost to attrition.² The new legislation also promotes the privatization of public universities,³ a radical move for a system of higher education in which public institutions play a historically dominant role, leading to doubts about the future autonomy of the university system. Public research institutes are also affected by the legislation. An across-the-board reduction of civil-service personnel will lead to 10% cuts in staffing levels at research institutes.⁴ As a result, at many institutes, hiring ceilings are now lower than current staffing levels, forcing freezes in permanent hires until excess personnel can be shed through attrition, a process that will take years.

The *de facto* hiring freezes at public research institutes will have particularly devastating effects. Permanent hiring in the public sector has already been frozen for the past six years, so government agencies, including research institutes, have increasingly relied on the use of temporary contracts. As a remedy, in 2006 the Prodi government passed a “stabilization” package allowing temporary public-sector employees to be hired permanently if they had matured three years of service and passed a competitive selection procedure. However, a bill currently in Parliament (DDL1441-quater, which was approved by the lower chamber on 15 October) would put a premature end to the stabilization program. Moreover, because of budget reductions and legal restrictions on the use of temporary labor introduced with L133/08,⁵ it will no longer be possible to renew the contracts of temporary employees.

¹ L133/08, Article 66, comma 13 – See <http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/08133l.htm>

² L133/08, Article 66, comma 13

³ L133/08, Article 16

⁴ L133/08, Article 66, comma 14

⁵ L133/08, Article 49

To understand the implications, it is helpful to consider the plight of one research institute in particular. The Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare (INFN, the Italian National Institute of Nuclear Physics) has contributed critically to the design and construction of the accelerator and experiments for the LHC project at CERN, with a total investment of about 1 billion euros over the last decade. Half of that outlay has been reinvested in Italy in the form of industrial contracts, advancing the competitiveness of the Italian technological sector.

Of the 1800 permanent INFN employees, about 800 are researchers or applied researchers, about 700 are technicians, and about 300 are administrative staff members. Under normal circumstances, young researchers are typically on temporary contracts (in post-doctoral or similar positions) for four years, after which about half are admitted to the permanent staff. The INFN should then have about 160 “structural” temporary employees at any given time. After six years of hiring freezes, instead, there are currently about 600 temporary employees, of which about 300 researchers.

As a result of the recent legislative developments, many of the INFN researchers and technicians with temporary contracts will be laid off. Most have never had the chance to participate in a selection procedure for a permanent contract. Few will be able to do so in the future. Their loss will be crippling for the INFN—they are 25% of the personnel, representing the INFN’s youngest and most productive research assets. Many have detailed technical knowledge of aspects of experiments at the LHC and elsewhere.

Other public research institutes are similarly affected. A recent article in *Nature*⁶ puts the total number of temporary researchers at risk at 4500. The training of a researcher requires hundreds of thousands of euros of public investment. The growing brain-drain as young Italian researchers flee to foreign employment will condemn Italian research to a slow but relentless decline.

The Coordinamento Nazionale Precari INFN (National Coordinating Committee for INFN Temporary Workers) recognizes that only through a vital research program can Italy maintain its competitiveness and its ability to innovate and guarantee its long-term prosperity. We urge a return to a serious, competitive, and sustained system for the recruitment of researchers, as well as funding levels for research that are similar to those in other European nations. To this end, we seek to inform the scientific community and the general public, in Italy and abroad, about the gravity of the present situation.

Coordinamento Nazionale Precari INFN
National Coordinating Committee for INFN Temporary Workers

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⁶ E. Feresin, A. Abbott, *Nature*, **455**, 840-841 (2008).