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News

New law threatens Italian research jobs

Scientists protest over government's cost cutting.

Emiliano Feresin & [Alison Abbott](#) ([/news/author/Alison+Abbott/index.html](http://news/author/Alison+Abbott/index.html))

Nearly 2,000 Italian researchers will lose promised permanent positions under a law that is expected to come into force by the end of the year. They may have to leave public research altogether.

Last week, the chamber of deputies in Silvio Berlusconi's new centre-right government considered the bill, which is intended to reduce public spending by streamlining the civil service. Several researchers have put themselves up for sale on eBay, as part of a campaign that has also involved tens of thousands of protesters marching through the streets of Rome and other cities.

The proposed law explicitly reverses another law passed by the previous, centre-left government, whereby long-term temporary research employees could be taken on permanently if they were suitably qualified. As it also prevents scientists from being employed on sequential short-term contracts, those already selected for permanency who have had more than three years of contract in the past five years will now be let go.

Renato Brunetta, the minister for public administration and innovation who designed the new law, has enraged scientists further by referring to many civil servants as *fannulloni*, or 'idlers'.

Researchers in Italy are civil servants, and the number of positions available is determined by the central government rather than by individual research agencies. The past decade has seen almost no new recruitment, and the number of temporary research staff has consequently rocketed. There are at least 4,500 long-term temporary staff — known as *precari*, in reference to their precarious positions — who stumble from one short-term contract to another.

The scientists say that their protest is not directed against the conventional postdoc system, but against the unhealthy ratio of temporary to permanent staff. "We have pathological numbers because new long-term positions have been blocked," says Luciano Maiani, president of the CNR, Italy's national research council.

As a result of the protests, Brunetta says that researchers will be given until 1 July 2009 while he investigates their claims. But presidents of the various Italian research agencies believe that the only way out of the situation is for the agencies to have more autonomy from the civil service.

"The government should recognize the highly specific professionalism of the research personnel — it is not appropriate for them to fall under civil-service rules," says Enzo Boschi, president of Italy's National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology.



Renato Brunetta has lambasted the civil service.

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Claudio Gatti is a particle physicist at the National Institute of Nuclear Physics in Frascati who stands to lose a promised permanent job under the proposed law. He says that "in the Italian research system there's no planning, no mobility, no future — but we are ready to fight for our rights with every legal means available to us".

Research and education minister Mariastella Gelmini has not commented publicly on the situation, and did not respond to requests from *Nature* for comments.

See Editorial, [page 835 \(http://www.nature.com/doi/10.1038/455835b\)](http://www.nature.com/doi/10.1038/455835b).

Comments

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While reading your article published online 15 October 2008 | Nature 455, 840-841 (2008) | doi: 10.1038/455840b, I appreciated your reporting the dramatic situation of Italian scientists both with a permanent or a temporary position, as a consequence of lack of governmental funding. I agree that the research and education minister Mariastella Gelmini should have at least made public the motivations for further cutting new positions in science. I was disappointed however by your lack of information on reporting Renato Brunetta, the minister for public administration and innovation, offensive qualification of civil servant as 'fannulloni?', 'capitani di ventura?' and so on. Perhaps you have not been informed that permanent civil servants' leave of absence for illness dropped by 45% after Brunetta call for a more productive work. Unfortunately a similar response might be expected also from perhaps a more limited percentage of 'temporary' researches mostly involved in commercial activities. Unless you quote facts as they really are, your articles lose the objectivity one may expect by reading Nature. The real problem in Italy is in a traditional lack of capacity to select scientists on the base of their competence, surely an exclusive and unforgivable responsibility of the older generations of scientists which operate the selections. And this problem involves scientists as well as academic positions and other categories of civil servants, eventually offering the general public with their image of a poor productive people, not deserving greater governmental support thus unfortunately making difficult the merit to emerge.

Posted by: **Pierlorenzo Marchiafava** | 16 Oct, 2008

Dear Pierlorenzo, your claim that researchers with temporary positions were indeed "idlers" is a strong one indeed. Given the request that you make that "facts must be quoted as they really are", I would expect that you can report DATA and NUMBERS about how much the "leave of absence for illness" really dropped when limited to precarious researchers only, instead of the whole of the Italian civil servants. I naively expect you might find some significant discrepancies. As it is written now, your comment suffers from the same shortcomings that you claimed were present in the article you criticized.

Posted by: **francesco bisio** | 16 Oct, 2008

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