

## **A PORTRAIT OF THE SITUATION OF SCIENTIFIC WORKERS AND THE SCIENCE ENDEAVOUR IN PORTUGAL**

On the National Scientists Day<sup>i</sup> celebrated on May 16<sup>th</sup> several organisations representing scientific workers organised in Lisbon an important rally against precariousness in Science. Demonstrators met in front of the main building of Lisbon University and marched to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education about 2 km away.

At the Ministry's headquarters, a delegation from the structures promoting the protest was received by a press office representative, who was handed a document with their main demands, widely shared by the class.

The text below is a free translation of the text handed over to the recipient. It portraits in a comprehensive way the difficulties experienced by an overwhelming majority of scientific workers working in Portuguese science and higher education institutions.



# **RALLY AGAINST PRECARIOUSNESS IN SCIENCE**

## **MAIN DEMANDS**

### **1 — Ensure the maintenance of current funding for the scientific employment of holder's of a doctor's degree**

According to the data published by the Observatory of Scientific and Teaching Employment (OSTE) of the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (DGEES), since the beginning of the government's Stimulus Program for Scientific Employment in 2017, 5799 contracts have been signed with PhD graduates for carrying out scientific research, technological development, science and technology management and communication activities, as well as 1046 post-doctoral scholarship contracts. All these contracts were and are financed with public money. Considering that 90% of current contracts and all scholarships will come to an end in the next three years, what is at stake in the first place is to ensure that the money currently allocated to scientific employment continues to finance the employment of PhDs. Only then will the merit of the work they carry out in the National Scientific and Technological System (NSTS) be recognized and conditions created for their work to be continued.

### **2 — Ensure a permanent funding mechanism for the hiring of personnel for the Scientific Research Career**

In recent years, the almost exclusive recourse to fixed-term contracts has led to the emptying of the Scientific Research Career, jeopardizing the functioning of the NSTS. There is an urgent need to create a permanent funding mechanism that allows for integration in the Scientific Research Career, with the corresponding budget allocation from the State Budget and an adequate reinforcement of the number of positions in institutions' staffing plans. That mechanism must allow for the hiring of PhDs for permanent positions in the Scientific Research Career as well as to the immediate access and progression in the career of workers that have for decades made possible the functioning of the NSTS with their research work while submitted to a series of successive precarious employment relationships only acceded through competitive international tenders. This is the case in regular public Institutions of Higher Education and Science, as well as in public institutions that have adopted a foundation status and in different types of Private Non-Profit Institutions (PNPI). The NSTS is a whole and access to permanent contracts cannot be restricted to just one part of it, discriminating against workers in different institutions. Only in this way will it be possible to overcome a contractual regime inadequate for the necessary consolidation of the development of the NSTS and make up for retirements that will take place in the coming years. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MSTHE) knows this. It does not intend to change course for political reasons. Higher Education and Science Institutions also know this. They do not intend to press for changes for strategic-financial reasons. They prefer to have researchers that work at zero cost, and benefit from their scientific achievements,

from the funding sources raised by them and from their contribution to student training and the supervision of researchers working for a master's or a doctor's degree.

### **3 — Revoke the Statute of Research Grants and replace all grants by employment contracts**

Hiring researchers through research grants is one of the main forms of precariousness of scientific workers. The Statute of Research Grants (SRG) in force in Portugal does not guarantee the most basic labor rights. Researchers who are subject to it are not considered as workers by their institutions. However they advance scientific knowledge and actively contribute to the NSTS with their work. This reality urgently needs to be changed by revoking the SRG and replacing all grants by employment contracts. Only thus can the consecration of rights of these workers be guaranteed and combat the absolute lack of protection to which the SRG relegates them.

The widespread use of employment contracts when hiring junior researchers<sup>ii</sup> is, moreover, the practice in many other countries (e.g. Spain) as well as in other employment sectors (e.g. medicine).

As long as the SRG is not revoked, it is necessary to apply compensatory measures for the restricted labor rights that this regime implies. Low contributions to Social Security require a compensation mechanism for the pensions of all that work or have worked under the SRG conditions. Adding to this situation is the fact that the monthly value of grants has been frozen between 2002 and 2019, implying a loss of purchasing power of more than 20% in that period. Updates indexed to the National Minimum Wage, as determined by the Foundation for Science and Technology in 2019, do not compensate for inflation. In the first year the update was calculated as a percentage of the monthly value of the grant but in the following years a fixed amount was set (i.e., in 2023, all grants were updated by €55 while inflation reached 7.8%). It is, therefore, necessary that a sustained update value is adopted that corresponds to the increase in the cost of living, starting with an extraordinary update to take place still in 2023. Finally, the exponential increase in the number of grants in a non-academic environment characterises a science policy centered on the creation of economic value, that favours applied science in detriment of fundamental science. Such a policy subverts the principle of proportionality that has always defined the distribution of grants per scientific domain, while extending labour precariousness to other sectors. This is, therefore, a policy that not only shall not be kept or expanded namely by including the so-called Scientific Employment Stimulus Programme set up by the Government. It has instead to be reversed.

### **4 —Laboratory technicians, as well as personnel engaged in science management and related functions shall have permanent contracts**

The so-called *Program for the Extraordinary Regularization of Precarious Links in the Public Administration* (PREVPAP) <sup>iii</sup> devised by the government failed to solve the situation of a large number of workers employed to satisfy permanent needs of an institution, be it technical functions, science management functions and other similar

functions. In fact they work under inappropriate links such as fixed-term contracts, grant contracts and short-term contracts. It is imperative to change this situation with the integration and functional and salary enhancement of these workers.

## **5 — Permanently hire guest professors**

The number of "false" guest lecturers in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reaches an absolutely unacceptable scale today, calling into question the quality of teaching. HEIs systematically violate the limits of the number of guest lecturers set in the Statute of the University Teaching Career (ECDU) and in the Career Statute of the Teaching Personnel of Higher Polytechnic Institutions (ECPDESP). Those lecturers experience a higher teaching load than career teachers for the same percentage of dedication. Even when working in the same institution for consecutive semesters, their contracts often do not correspond to the entire calendar year. This situation has direct implications in their salary and access to labor rights.

It is of the most elementary justice to regularize the links of false guest lecturers, by integration in the appropriate careers, a measure that simultaneously responds to the accelerated aging and impending retirements of many permanent professors at HEIs.

## **6 —Ending the chronic underfunding of Higher Education and Science Institutions**

Decades of inadequate science policies have led to chronic underfunding of higher education and science institutions. State budget transfers are insufficient to guarantee adequate working conditions (laboratory spaces; work offices; libraries; material resources, among others) and to cope with the day-to-day management of an institution (salaries, purchases, general electricity and gas costs, etc.). Thus, a substantial increase in the transfer of funds from the State Budget is necessary.

Portugal's target is to invest in research and development at 3% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030, but current investment does not exceed 1.7%, while the European average is already around 2.6%. We urge the government to take political responsibility for this sector. It will not be by keeping an investment strongly below the European average that the country will enter a path of development.

## **7 — Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions**

The application of the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (RJIES) is tantamount to a disclaimer by the State of responsibility for the operation of higher education institutions. The Act provided for an excessive centralization of institutional management and governance, enabled the creation of new organizational forms under private law regime, and allowed competitive mechanisms to gain control over democracy and academic freedom. The new framework allowed an instrumentalization of teaching and knowledge production, facilitated the precariousness of scientific workers and widened institutional asymmetries, with consequent intensification of endogamous mechanisms, mental health problems and situations of harassment. A solution is required that allows overcoming these problems, guarantees the democratic government of

institutions thus enabling the building of an academy of humanistic education and training where critical reflection plays a central role.

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<sup>i</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> of May has been declared Portugal's "National Scientists Day" by a parliamentary resolution adopted on November 15, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.eurodoc.net/sites/default/files/attachments/2017/133/eurodoc2017-juniorresearchersdefinitionandchallenges.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/lei/112-2017-114425584> Law (in Portuguese)