



Serbia's researchers take to streets over pay and precarity

Researchers went on strike over long-running pay dispute with government

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Researchers in Serbia have staged a strike and protest in Belgrade (pictured) over a long-running pay dispute with the government, which they accuse of politicising the issues.

The protesters gathered on 28 February in a demonstration organised by the Trade Union of Science, which says it has 15 per cent of all employees in academia as members. It presented an open letter to the government, signed by some 2,000 people working at research organisations, universities and innovation centres.

At stake is the level of pay and job security for those in the sector, with the Trade Union of Science's online campaign, 'Decent Work in Academia', calling for safer jobs for young researchers, equal wages for equal work and "consistent implementation of laws in academia".

Wage disparities

A key call is for the "correction of pay disparities and equal work compensation in the wages of researchers of the same category". This relates to the use of a research ranking for determining salary levels that was compiled in 2011 and has not been updated since.

"The wages that we get today are still determined by the initial ranking from 2011, and all the young colleagues who were not subjected to this ranking were awarded the middle-low category," the researchers said. "These

discrepancies can amount to up to 70 per cent higher wages, or an average mortgage loan, with no meaningful reason.”

Maja Kosanović, a senior research associate at Institute for the Application of Nuclear Energy at the University of Belgrade, said that the lack of a promised re-evaluation had cost some scientists €20,000-50,000 over the past decade, equivalent to half the price of a three-bedroom apartment in Belgrade.

The government did not respond to requests for comment from Research Professional News.

Job security

Another big issue is what the union described as “a deterioration of security” of jobs in academia.

“Researchers who work in faculties have no security, with one-year contracts as a standard, and no guaranteed long-term financing of the programmes,” the union said. “Non-teaching institutes are also discouraged by the government to offer secure job contracts before PhD, which is often in collision with Serbian labour law.”

“Some [researchers] have had a one-year, or even 3-month contracts for 11 years already,” Kosanović said. And as people in these positions are not recognised as employees, she added, they miss out on various benefits, such as free transport and hot meals.

To fix the issue, she estimates the government would need around €25 million a year, which she says is “not big money for the state”.

Despite long-running dialogue over the issues, the union said it had “lost trust in the government”.

“We consider education and science to be crucial for our country, but we cannot urge young generations to educate, to choose to be professional researchers, and to build their lives and raise their families in Serbia, while our work is undignified and insecure,” it said.

New financing

Researchers got one piece of good news ahead of the protest, with the government announcing on 25 February a new programme on institutional financing for research institutes, which should guarantee long-term and regular finances for science.

The union credited its “intensive negotiations” with the government over the past week for a clause in the programme for research organisations to guarantee new five-year work contracts for all young researchers, who have been on one-year contracts.

But some researchers said that the government had largely been silent on their demands until recently, ahead of elections next month, which they interpreted as a politicisation of the issues.

Some researchers linked perceived government inaction to recent bankruptcies or privatisations of research institutes, such as Jaroslav Černi Water Institute and Kirilo Savić natural sciences and engineering research institute, fearing more could follow without wider financial support to R&D.

The financing agreement followed a meeting of union and government representatives. While welcoming the document, Đurđica Jovović, president of the union, told the protesters that this “is not the end, it is only the start” as there are no guarantees that the programme will be implemented without further pressure and legislation.

She told an estimated 1,000 protesters that scientists had no new demands, and just wanted the existing laws and agreements to be obeyed in order to fix the “11-year-long injustice”.

She said scientists are called in when the government needs help, be it on responses to floods or Covid-19, but that the government otherwise pays little attention to their needs.

“The state only remembers to be proud of scientific results when the election campaign starts,” she said. “We’ve had enough of such tributes to science, scientists, and scientific results.”

Image: Lela Ilijic

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- By Mico Tatalovic

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