France: researchers protest Raffarin government with mass resignations

Alex Lefebvre
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In the run-up to the first round of France's regional elections on March 21, researchers are protesting the funding policies of the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin by resigning their administrative positions en masse. They are opposing government under-funding of scientific and academic research.

On March 9, some 800 section heads and 600 other principal investigators in research teams throughout France assembled in Paris and voted overwhelmingly to resign their administrative positions. These included researchers from highly prestigious institutions such as the Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS—National Center for Scientific Research), the Pasteur Institute, and the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (Inserm—National Insitute for Health and Medical Research). The daily *Le Monde* reported that only about ten researchers voted against the action.

These resignations, although not directly affecting current lab work, will largely halt the organizational work of research teams—the ordering of new equipment, the search for new funding, the attainment of travel grants, etc.

Protesting researchers, organized in collectives such as "Sauvons la Recherche" (Let's Save Research), have also called for an "Estates-General" of researchers to be convened independently of the government in order to plan future research programs and funding requests.

Their petitions have received 64,000 signatures by researchers and students and 161,217 from concerned citizens. The daily *La Croix* found that over 80 percent of those polled supported the researchers. Even amongst Raffarin's own electorate of "conservative voters," support for the researchers was around 75 percent.

Researchers are reacting to a string of measures by the Raffarin government targeting educational and research institutions for funding and job cuts. The government has eliminated youth employment contracts for staff jobs in the public schools, shifted financial support for research students to poorly-paid renewable contracts, and refused to disburse promised funding for research institutions such as the CNRS.

These cuts have fueled a growing movement of younger French researchers abroad (especially to the US) in search of more secure, better-paid positions. Established researchers in France have complained of "getting old together."

On February 9, researchers, together with striking part-time theater workers, signed a petition in the popular music magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* calling for opposition to the "War on Intelligence." (http://www.lesinrocks.com/inrocks/galeries/appel/appel.html).

It stated: "All the sectors of knowledge, research, thought, social links, all producers of knowledge and public debate are targets today of massive attacks which reveal a new state anti-intellectualism. We see a very coherent policy being pursued. It is a policy of impoverishing or targeting any space considered non-productive in the short term, useless, or dissident, of targeting the invisible work of intelligence, of all of those places where society thinks itself, dreams itself, invents itself, treats itself, judges itself, and repairs itself."

The petition also noted the socio-economic consequences of these policies: "This war on intelligence is an unprecedented fact in the recent history of the country. It's the end of the French exception: a quick look at our European neighbors, from post-Thatcher Great Britain to Berlusconi's Italy, shows what happens to schools, hospitals, universities, theaters and publishing houses in the aftermath such policies which, although carried out in the name of economic common sense and budgetary rigor, have exorbitant human, social, and economic costs."

Such petitions, including the January 7 petition of the Let's Save Research association (in English at http://recherche-en-danger.apinc.org/article.php3?id_article=222), began to attract sufficient media attention to become a political issue in late February.

The Raffarin government responded in characteristic fashion, combining crude insults against its immediate opponents with empty promises aimed at deceiving the public.

On February 24, Patrick Devedjian, delegate minister for local liberties, gave a radio interview in which he attacked "intellectuals" who "in France, have the habit of signing petitions," while "in the US, they win Nobel prizes." On February 25, Raffarin wrote a letter to *Le Monde* accusing researchers of being extremist, unpatrioti,c and simplistic: "I think partisan geometry is winning over Republican finesse. As you know very well, extremism nourishes itself with

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intellectual reductionism."

On February 27, Claudie Haigneré, delegate minister for research, announced new measures in favor of the research sector: releasing 294 million euros of scheduled 2002-2003 funding that had never been paid out, restoring 120 full-time positions out of 550 that were to be cut or transformed into temporary contracts, and increasing wages for temporary positions for young researchers. However, on the issue of replacing guaranteed, full-time positions by temporary contracts, the government refused to budge.

Researchers and researchers' unions denounced the proposals as insufficient. Alain Trautmann, spokesman for Sauvons la Recherche, said: "We are very well treated in words, but when decision time comes, the actions do not match the words."

Raffarin subsequently promised to increase the percentage of French GDP devoted to research funding to 3 percent by 2010, while still refusing to grant young researchers full-time contracts and permanent positions. This move was particularly clumsy, as Raffarin was taking up a 2002 campaign promise of President Jacques Chirac that, over the past two years, has been shown to be empty.

Numerous researchers told *Le Monde* that they were resigning because they did not believe the government's promises, and that their main demand, secure employment, had been ignored. Didier Chatenay, head of a CNRS complex fluid dynamics lab, resigned in a letter stating: "Our essential demand is jobs and, on this point, we have received nothing."

Explaining why he did not believe the government's promises, Yvon Maday, head of mathematics doctoral studies at Paris' Pierre-et-Marie-Curie University, said: "For the moment, what we need is new positions, including in the universities where we will lose, in 2004, 22 percent of mathematics positions."

The Raffarin government, committed to a policy of imposing massive social cuts while increasing police and military spending, is unwilling and unable to meet the movement's demands. Ruling circles in France are also conscious that granting significant concessions to researchers, particularly on the question of job security and conditions, would encourage wider layers of the population—in the first instance, part-time theater workers and other dissatisfied public sector workers—to voice their social demands.

As *Le Monde* noted on March 8, hospital workers' and school teachers' unions as well as the part-time theater workers' movement are planning strikes and demonstrations this week. Although it seems likely that most hospital workers and school teachers will not participate, this is more the result of their bitter appraisal of the unions' ability to successfully lead a struggle against the government than approval of the government's policies.

Hospital workers showed "a manifest and persistent malaise," according to *Le Monde*, and educational workers were unlikely to strike principally because of the Raffarin government's withholding of pay after the massive spring 2003 strikes, which were betrayed by the unions.

The Raffarin government is therefore seeking to isolate and disarm, or, if necessary, smash the researchers' movement. It has signaled that it is essentially unwilling to grant its demands and is prepared for a long struggle.

Libération's March 9 interview with Raffarin was a classic example. He distanced himself from Devedjian's attacks on French researchers' scientific abilities and affirmed his willingness to "respect them in all their decisions." But when asked whether he would use the billions of euros he was promising for research to fund full-time positions, Raffarin equivocated: "We can discuss how to use the supplementary effort. Since the formation of the researchers' associations, we have made significant steps. I don't want a negotiation that is carried out by petitions and in the press. Let's form a national committee and open a dialog. Let's not view this question from an overly political angle."

When asked about those who had signed the *Inrockuptibles*' petition, Raffarin responded: "I think it's a political maneuver." Elsewhere in the article, he darkly insinuated that "certain political organizations" were trying to benefit from the researchers' actions.

The right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, which has close links to the Raffarin government, spelled out the issue more bluntly in a provocatively titled March 9 article, "Resignations Without Consequences." If universities and research institutions chose on the whole to accept the resignations, *Le Figaro* wrote, they "could have hit upon a very 'clean' way of getting rid of the 'treacherous ones.' [...] At Matignon [the prime minister's office], where different resignation scenarios have been coldly considered, it is thought that accepting these resignations could be a 'good way to get rid of those who always get in the way.'"

Were the resignations not accepted, *Le Figaro* warned of a long and fruitless struggle with the government. "This would mean the death of the movement," the newspaper wrote. "The petitioners could go further and mount an administrative strike... Presumably many petitioners would refuse to get into something that would rapidly take on the appearance of trench warfare."

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