

Open letter of the national coalition Re-Strike (Research Strike).

On Friday, November 4 at 2 pm, will be held the national assembly at "Sapienza" University in Rome.

1. Starting of the Re-Strike coalition

On June 29, the PNRR Bis bill has become law (L. 79/2022). The article 14 of Law 79/2022 includes modifications radically changing the Italian academic and research system. The new law reforms the university recruitment process, affecting, in particular, the numerous precarious workers who teach and carry out research in the Italian academic institutions. Apparently, the reason behind this new law is to reduce, or even eliminate, the precarious labour that characterizes the Italian academic system, lower the median age of tenure faculty members by establishing non-tenure (*Contrattista di Ricerca*) and tenure-track (*Ricercatore Tenure Track*) positions leading in about 11 years to tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, and secure employment with good pay and working conditions for precarious academic workers.

Yet, the reality of the Italian university system after the law came into effect in June 2022, is totally different from the one that those who promoted the law wished for. Contrary to expectations, this new reform of the Italian academic world will affect the life of numerous precarious academic workers and, more broadly, will decrease the quality of university research in Italy.

To sum up, the implementation of the Law 79/2022 suggests that the reform will not truly solve the lengthy process for earning a tenure-track position and the promotion to Associate Professor. In most cases, the reform will contribute not to renew the former non-tenure-track contracts (*Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di Tipo A*) and postdoctoral fellowships (*Assegnista di Ricerca*), and it will encourage the spread of even more precarious forms of employment, given the high costs of the new non-tenure-track positions established by the new law (for a detailed discussion see section no. 2).

These consequences are not only suggested by the budget restraints of Italian universities and the chronic lack of investments from Italian governments in higher education and academic research, but also confirmed in the article 14 of Law 79/2022. For example, despite the increase of expenses for the new non-tenure-track positions, the Law 79/2022 explicitly declares that universities will be stretch thin from a fiscal perspective since they should face the new hiring costs “within the financial resources already set by legislation currently in force, and, in any case, without new or far outweigh financial expenses for the government finances.” The general lack of public spending in higher education and research and the new hiring costs will cause the dismissal of numerous precarious researchers, affecting their personal and professional life. Further exacerbating the issue, there will be no return on previous investments the Italian State made in academic research, since various research projects and academic jobs will not be funded anymore.

We, the 15,300 *Assegnisti di Ricerca* (Postdoctoral Fellows), have been unpleasantly surprised and taken aback by the new reform that will affect our life and the key social role of universities. For this reason, we have opened a debate in response to the Parliament’s decision and we have assembled an autonomous coalition, named Re-Strike, as an alternative to current unions or recognized students’/researchers’ organisations, considering that many of them have supported the reform and considering the lack of transparency of the Parliament in managing the academic recruitment reform.

The need for a collective discussion has been raised to better understand the new hiring and career rules, since we were urgently worried about the future of our already precarious professional life once the Parliament passed the new law. For this reason, we have created a Telegram group (<https://tinyurl.com/assegnisti>) and called a first national assembly in Rome on July 20. After this first

meeting, we have established a coordinating committee to formalize our voice, collectively develop strategies with all pre-tenure workers in the Italian universities to contrast the most negative consequences of the current reform, demand for immediate and meaningful improvements of the reform in collective bargaining negotiations, and work together for a more equal and far-reaching reform of the Italian academic recruitment system.

This collective mobilization aims at opening a broader public debate on university in Italy, involving those who should have estimated the negative consequences of the reform, and denouncing the increase of urgent legislative measures that undermine citizens' participation in politics and democratic public affairs.

2. Our evaluation of the pre-tenure reform

The fundamental changes in the Italian academic recruitment system that the reform has introduced are the *Contrattisti di Ricerca* (equivalent to non-tenure-track researchers), who replace the *Assegnisti di Ricerca* (equivalent to postdoctoral fellows), and the RTT, i.e., *Ricercatore Tenure Track*, who replaces both the former non-tenure-track researcher, *Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di Tipo A* (RTD-A), and of tenure-track-researcher, *Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di Tipo B* (RTD-B).

The *Contratto di Ricerca* is a salaried employment including social security, such as income in case, for example, of illness or unemployment (Naspi), paid holidays, and the so-called 13-month pay. The monthly wage is expected to be higher for a *Contrattista di Ricerca* than the one offered to an *Assegnista di Ricerca*, bringing it from 1,400 euros to 1,600 euros. The minimum length of employment for a *Contrattista di Ricerca* is raised up to 2 years. Of course, the new *Contratto di Ricerca* introduces significant improvements in the working conditions of non-tenured-track academic workers if compared to the *Assegno di Ricerca*. These major changes have held significant importance to the effectiveness of political rhetoric among those who have sponsored and supported the reform.

But we are entering **murky** waters.

Since the *Contrattisti di Ricerca* get more benefits than the *Assegnisti di Ricerca*, it will be far more expensive to hire a *Contrattista di Ricerca* for universities. The main problem here is that the reform does declare that neither new nor additional public funding will be provided to meet the new hiring expenses. Acerbating the issue more is that the Law 79/2022 explicitly forbids universities to increase their budget to hire the new *Contrattisti di Ricerca*, since universities' total expenses cannot exceed the average total expenditure incurred in the previous three years. As a result, about a third of the current 15,300 *Assegnisti di Ricerca* risk to be forced out of academia, while another significant part will be downgraded to research fellowships alternative to the *Assegni di Ricerca*, losing the few social benefits ensured to the *Assegnisti di Ricerca*, or they will be hired for occasional work.

Indeed, before the reform, universities needed to project a gross expenditure of about 25,000 euros to fund a one-year *Assegno di Ricerca*. Now, universities will need to set a gross cost of more than 80,000 euros to hire a two-year *Contrattista di Ricerca*, whose contract can be renewed for other two to three years (considering the five-year limit of the new contract). The reality is that thousands of us, precarious academic workers, will be pushed out and not be rehired, although the vital role we have played in universities. By doing so, Italy also risks to lose the knowledge and innovations that have been fostered and developed by numerous precarious workers over the years, and to not have return on the enormous public investments made in academic researches and training.

Although the Law 79/2022 abrogates any form of research fellowship for postdocs alongside the *Assegni di Ricerca*, many precarious *Assegnisti* might be sponsored in the future by research fellowships alternative to the *Assegni di Ricerca* due to the autonomous governance of universities in

Italy. Indeed, there is no national regulation for research fellowships different from the *Assegni di Ricerca*. Moreover, no minimum wage and minimum funding period have ever been regulated for these alternative forms of fellowship. The absence of a real national regulation in this matter and the autonomous governance of universities will unsurprisingly lead to social dumping, competition, and self-exploitation.

Senator Francesco Verducci, the real kingmaker of the reform, the first who signed the maxi-amendment to the PNRR Bis decree containing part of the new academic recruitment system and now discussed on the floor of the Senate, has claimed that job insecurity will be drastically reduced. Despite the support this reform has received, it is clear it will have a disastrous impact on universities and their workers.

To sum up, the former tenure-track researcher, *Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di Tipo B* (RTD-B), whose contract had a term of 3 years before tenure, will be replaced by the new tenure-track researcher, *Ricercatori Tenure Track* (RTT). The RTT contract will last 6 years. Furthermore, to get the tenure and the promotion to Associate professor, a RTT will have to take a teaching practical exam set by the Department Board (*Collegio di Dipartimento*). The former non-tenure-track researcher, *Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di Tipo A* (RTD-A), will actually receive all the non-structural funding set by the PNRR for the *Contratti di Ricerca*, as confirmed in the L 79/2022 and by the former Italian Minister of University and Research Maria Cristina Messa. A marginal part of those precarious workers who are *Assegnisti di Ricerca* today will be hired as *Contrattisti di Ricerca*. Many of the *Assegnisti di Ricerca* will however receive unspecified research fellowships or become occasional workers. We should know that research fellowships alternative to the *Assegnisti di Ricerca* do not provide access to the unemployment benefits that the former *Assegnisti di Ricerca* received (Diss-Coll).

Precarious conditions of work and job insecurity will not be eradicated. On the contrary, the former *Assegnisti di Ricerca* will lose all the social benefits gained over the years. This result is the opposite of what policymakers have auspicated supporting and approving this harmful reform. The reform will only abolish the joining link in the pre-tenure positions and consequently polarize inequalities among those who are privileged, working, for example, in universities in Northern Italy or in highly productive fields or coming from a wealthy family, and those who are underprivileged.

Furthermore, despite a transition period has been granted before the implementation of the new law to open some very last positions as *Assegnisti di Ricerca*, it is a six-month window of time. It is clear that this transition period is completely inadequate to ensure stability to individual and departmental research programs that have been projected on the expected costs for hiring an *Assegnista*. Thousands of us will not be rehired and numerous ongoing and already funded projects will not be carried out in the future.

From this evaluation of the reality of the reform, there is no doubt that research funding and the protection of all pre-tenure workers' rights are fundamental to promote a healthy university system. Abolishing the *Assegni di Ricerca* while lacking of research funding means leaving a big hole in the Italian university system, by further eroding the rights and affecting the financial and working conditions of those precarious workers who have played an integral part in the ability of Italian universities to increase research quality and production.

In the end, the medium- and long-term scenario unfolds a steady allocation of public research funding mainly for the most profitable or more strategic fields, perpetuating and increasing geographical inequalities between the North and South of Italy and between scientific disciplines. At the same time, the one-time special funding investments, such as those set by the PNRR, will increase the number of PhD students, as it has followed from the establishment of industry PhD programs, and the number of predoc fellows. Both of them will not be able to pursue an academic career, if not transitioning from academia to industry.

3. Re-Strike objectives

Among its first aims, Re-Strike wants to overcome structural precarity of the Italian public university system gathering precarious academic workers (PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, non-tenure track researchers) who are interested in discussing and better understanding the recent reform dealing with precarious academic contracts and the public university career path.

Coordinating to promote debate and change in the Italian university

Re-Strike seeks at promoting a debate at national level concerning the perspectives of the Italian university system and scientific research after the significant changes brought in by the latest reform, focusing also on the impact the reform will have on the careers of precarious academic workers. Specifically, Re-Strike aims at promoting forms of collective mobilisation to highlight the counter effects of a reform that is not backed up by adequate financial support, despite the increasing costs due to the increase in value and duration of new research contracts (*Contratti di Ricerca*).

In order to do so, Re-Strike has among its purposes the creation of spaces for debate and discussion opened to all parties and political forces interested in promoting changes and adjustments to the new decree and willing to introduce adequate funding and social securities for all those who risk to be excluded from the university system, given the budget restraints of Italian universities and the chronic lack of investments from Italian governments in higher education and academic research if compared to all other European realities.

Coordinating to monitor how the reform impacts on pre-tenure academic workers

Re-Strike aims also at defining a punctual and critical state of the art of precarious academic contracts within the Italian universities, monitoring the effects of the reform during its implementation, systematizing data already available, and updating data.

Coordinating to build an inclusive space for pre-tenure academic workers

Re-Strike seeks at offering an inclusive and supportive space for discussion and mutual support among precarious academic workers. Additionally, the aim is to build constructive and collaborative relationships with other academic workers and the overall society.

To enhance collective awareness concerning the necessity of a structural and significant support to pre-tenure workers and the need of converting precarious work to regular employment for thousands of precarious academic workers, Re-Strike aims at highlighting their fundamental contribution to everyday activities and operations of the Italian university system.

4. Our requests

Given the lack of adequate research funding, it seems clear that in the overall university reform makes the academic system even more precarious. One-time special funding and temporary investments, such as PON or PNRR, are not enough. On the contrary, these alternative forms of funding risk of creating a “financial bubble” and increase the number of non-tenured researchers without any career perspective in the academia, if not transitioning to industry or private sector.

It is necessary to increase public expenditure on universities and academic research planning to allocate more than 1.5 billion Euros for the Ordinary Financing Fund. Such an increase the public expenditure will enhance research and teaching in the Italian university system, improving the student-to-faculty ratios to reach the European average for student-to-faculty ratio, and will offer better working prospects

to the 15,300 *Assegnisti di Ricerca*, precarious academic workers. Only if university funding is increased, the reform objectives will be achieved.

Our most urgent demands are:

- An extraordinary recruitment plan recruiting 5,000 tenure-track employees/researchers every year for 4 years considering that about 20,000 tenured professors have retired since 2008;
- A scalable yearly plan for recruiting about 5,000 tenure-track employees/researchers every year considering the future retirement of tenured professors to reach the European average for student-to-faculty ratio;
- Reduce to 3 years the duration of the new position as *Ricercatore Tenure Track* (RTT), since academic workers are already exposed to precarious working conditions for too long a time;
- Improve the postdoctoral contracts (*Contrattisti di Ricerca*)-to-tenure-track researchers (*Ricercatori Tenure Track*) ratio, to avoid the growth of precarious employment;
- Prolong the transitory period as defined by the new Law 79/2022 up to 2 years, to avoid the expulsion of thousands of today non-tenure track researchers (both *Assegnisti di Ricerca* and *Ricercatori a Tempo Determinato di Tipo A*), and remove the expenditure ceiling for recruiting the new *Contrattisti di Ricerca*);
- Abolish any form of research fellowships alternative to the *Assegno di Ricerca*, since they do not guarantee any right and social security, such as unemployment benefit;
- An effective corrective action to financially support universities to hire a number of new *Contrattisti di Ricerca*, at the end of the transitional period and for the following 3 years, as high as the number of *Assegnisti di Ricerca* hired in the 3 previous years;
- Abolish the Italian form for contract faculty (*Professore a Contratto*) for it is another form of exploitation of precarious academic workers. *Professori a contratto* are paid only for their teaching hours, despite the many responsibilities in addition to teaching, such as administering and grading exams, holding office hours, and supervising theses.

5. Next mobilization strategies

On the 4th of November a national assembly will be called to decide on the mobilization initiatives to undertake. Specifically, we will discuss for a possible strike in November or December, hoping that all 15,000 *Assegnisti di Ricerca* working today in Italy will join it. Additionally, we plan to discuss management, organizational, communication tools and collaboration strategies for the ReStrike coalition. At the moment, open source softwares are being installed on dedicated servers to guarantee security and maximum sharing opportunities at the same time. All actions necessary to involve PhD students and PhDs will be evaluated, considering that (as discussed during the first coordination meeting), although the special PNRR funds have increased the number of PhD students, the chances to get a permanent position in academia for new PhDs will significantly decreased after the implementation of the new university reform. In conclusion, during the national assembly planned for the 4th of November, we will discuss possible strategies to promote a collective debate to formulate and submit a new, concrete, and all-inclusive reform proposal of the Italian university system to the new Italian government.

The national coalition Re-Strike