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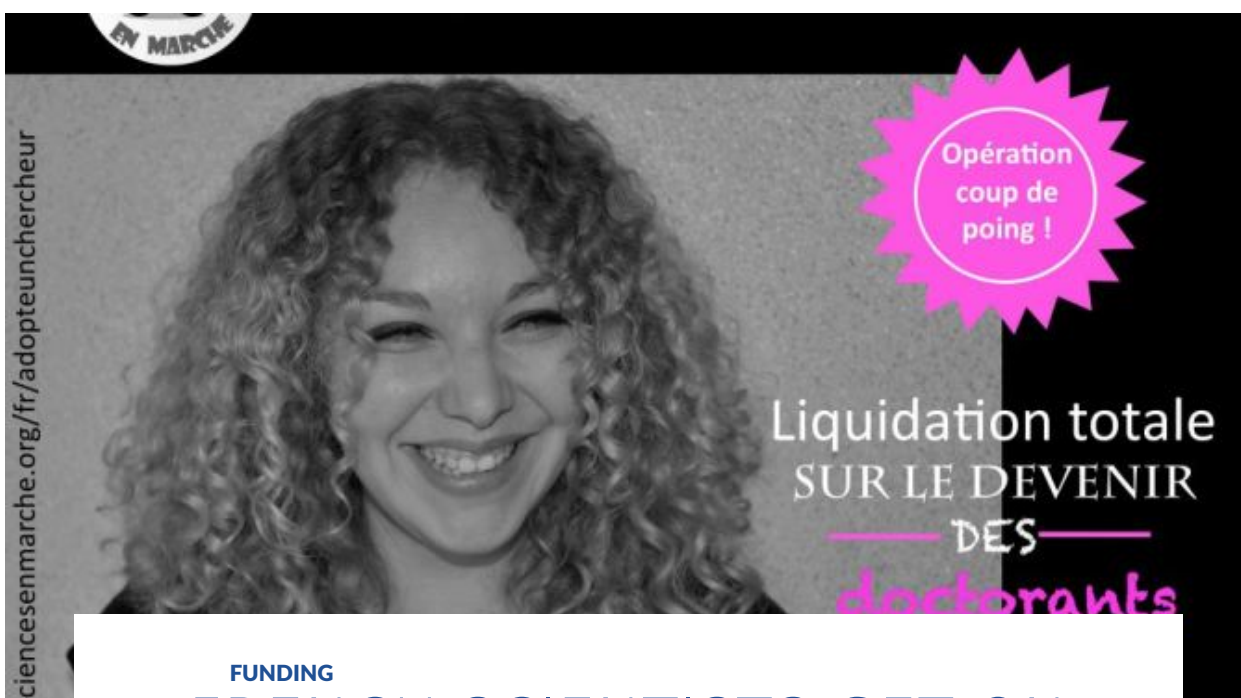
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FRENCH SCIENTISTS GET ON THEIR BIKES FOR RESEARCH

🕒 22 SEPTEMBER, 2014 👤 FIONA DUNLEVY 💬 1 COMMENT

French research is in trouble. A protest movement has arisen from the ranks of research centres and universities to protest against what French scientists



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devised a very French response to this problem: marching out on the street—albeit this time with a twist. From the 27th September 2014, the grassroots movement [Sciences en Marche](#), will see researchers march on Paris. They are planning to arrive in the French capital on 18th October, having bicycled in stages from labs all over France.

This follows prior expressions of unrest among the French research community. In June 2014, an extraordinary general meeting of CNRS—the largest state-funded research organisation in France—warned of a system in serious crisis. But that was not the only issue. The previous government's initiative to provide greater operational and financial [autonomy](#) to the country's universities has had some serious repercussions—including, ironically, the loss of autonomy of scientists. Previously, another protest arose among the ranks of the higher education system. They [reacted](#) to government plans, [announced](#) as far back as 2012, to merge existing universities into mega-universities, which they considered an ill-advised attempt to raise the ranking of French universities on the global stage.

For every problem, a solution

The *Sciences en Marche* protesters have three demands for the government. First, they request that funding be increased. Second, they want more stable science jobs. And third, they ask for a higher recognition for PhDs on the job market. Hollande's government has boasted of a ring-fenced science [budget](#). But “if you keep the funding level constant regardless of inflation, the small fraction left for research after paying salaries is dwindling,” explains Patrick Lemaire, principal investigator in developmental biology at the CNRS, Montpellier, and spokesperson for *Sciences en Marche*.

Researchers say that funding needs to increase, so that only 70% of the budget is spent on salaries, down from the current spend of 90%. This, says Lemaire, would give labs “the means to carry out science, which they can't at the time being.” This is linked to a general restructuring of how research is funded in France, according to some experts. Originally, most funding came from the state, who “paid laboratories almost systematically from year to year,” explains Renaud Debailley, lecturer in sociology at the University of Paris, Sorbonne, and an expert in the sociology of science. In recent years, there has been a shift towards competitive project-based funding, with “funding attributed by researcher performance,” he notes.





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Evaluation shake-up

A related sore point for researchers is evaluation of their projects, which used to be performed internally by their institutions. Since 2007, evaluation has been centralised under the umbrella of a national evaluation agency AERE—soon to be renamed the high council for research and higher education evaluation (HCERES). “What made the most noise,” says Debailley “is using quantitative indicators to evaluate teams and individuals. This has led to strong mobilisation on whether we can trust metrics to measure publications or the number of students.”

As a result, researchers “feel dispossessed by these mechanisms,” Debailley points out, adding: “They no longer have the impression that scientists determine their own priorities. The state has more leeway to impose direction and funding is just a lever for directing the policies of research and innovation.”

Stable research positions

Recruitment is also in crisis.

In the CNRS alone, approximately 800 jobs have been cut between 2002 and 2009. *Sciences en Marche* is calling for “an ambitious multiannual plan for statutory job creation at all levels of research and higher education.” This, they argue, could be paid for by a rethink of the existing research tax credit system, the *Crédit Impôt Recherche* (CIR). This tax relief was originally meant to entice companies into R&D and cost France about €6 billion last year. Experts estimate that just 1% of that sum would fund 1,000 jobs in higher education and research.

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researchers, Geneviève Fioraso, secretary of state for higher education and research [stressed](#) the importance of the CIR in encouraging private sector research and reiterated the government's stance that the CIR cannot be reworked to supplement public research funding. But as Lemaire explains "nobody really knows how much these companies [availing of the CIR] actually spend on research. Part of this money could be reallocated to public research."

Money isn't the only solution in creating a stable career path, warns Barend van der Meulen, head of science system assessment at the Rathenau Institute, the Netherlands, and an expert in science policy. "There are lots of positions for young researchers but not much for fixed staff. The competition between young researchers is very fierce for the next step," says van der Meulen, "it cannot simply be solved by more money. It has to be solved in a structural way."



According to the CNRS, French PhD holders are 3 times more likely to be unemployed than in comparable European countries. This, researchers say, is due to the unique double system of higher education system in France. The elite system of *grandes écoles* was established after the revolution as a counterpart to universities, which were then considered proxies of the Catholic church. *Sciences en Marche* say that steps need to be taken for better recognition of the PhD degree in the public and private sectors. "PhDs are not considered elite by French society," says Lemaire, "so if PhD graduates don't get jobs in academia, they have a hard time finding jobs in the private sector or in the higher levels of the administration."

University researchers are "clearly constructed as second-class citizens because of the double system with the *grande écoles*," says Michèle Lamont, a French-Canadian professor of sociology at Harvard, USA, and the author of a



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Not a new problem

This latest skirmish with the government is giving French scientists a sense of *déjà vu*. This is just the latest battle in a decade-long running war on science and research by scientists against the initiatives of successive governments. Alain Trautmann, principal investigator and director of immunology and hematology research at the CNRS, Institut Cochin, Paris, who led the protest movement *Sauvons la Recherche* (Save Research) in 2004 and 2005, says that the problems are “the same, if not more serious than in 2004.” (See his own [account in the EuroScientist](#)).

According to Trautmann, the loss of researcher autonomy is crucial. “Part of their freedom came from the fact that [laboratories] had basic funding,” says Trautmann, “This allowed them to take risks.” Today’s project-based funding model is pushing researchers into following “programmes decided by the Ministry of Research,” he adds. “One day it’s one research subject, two years later a different one. No serious researcher wants to change like that every two years.”

Lamont agrees, saying: “Researchers feel they’re not being given the means to do research or the authority to be evaluators of the quality of research. They’re always fighting to push back political interference.” She believes this means that “France is quickly losing speed compared to other countries.”



Cultural specificities





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of Political Research, Sciences Po, Paris, and author of a book called [La Grève](#) (the Strike) explains that “When we link research with economic growth, we have to carry out applied research that leads to patents. But the French still have an attachment to basic research and continue to distrust business.” According to Groux, the government is happy to invest in science as long as the economic returns are there. But for some researchers, he says, this “touches the neutrality of research. The question is: should research remain neutral in relation to the social and economic systems?”

So if the problems facing researchers are not new, what has pushed them into action this time? Due to the various reforms “people have just lived through ten difficult years and they’re worn out,” says Trautmann, “they can’t stand it anymore.” The level of dissatisfaction is especially acute since the socialist Hollande government came to power two years ago. “The policies have not really changed from one government to another,” says Debailley, “the questions of [job] precarity and autonomy are still the order of the day.” According to Lemaire, the *Sciences en Marche* movement was born from this disappointment. “When Sarkozy was in power, people trusted that when the socialists came there would be a change,” says Lemaire, “but there hasn’t been a change.”

On your bike

The organisers of *Sciences en Marche* have deliberately veered away from the more traditional style of explosive French street protests. “The aim is to get the attention and support of the public. It will be a very positive protest,” says Lemaire. Throughout their cycle to Paris, the researchers will stop at towns along the way to engage with the public at local popular science events under the umbrella of national celebrations called the [Fête de la Science](#) “to say this is our job, this is what we’re doing, and this is what we’re useful for.”

For Groux, the success of such a movement depends on noise. “To make noise,” says Groux “the unions need to mobilise.” And mobilise they have; *Sciences en Marche* now counts the major [science trade unions](#) in France amongst their supporters, adding mettle to the movement. This initiative “could be a complete flop, which would be very sad,” says Lemaire, “or it could be a resounding success.” Whatever the outcome, this will be a pivotal battle in the war to save French research from relegation on the world stage.

Featured image credit: Sciences en Marche

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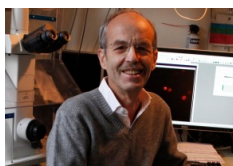
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Fiona Dunlevy

After a PhD and postdoc in molecular biology, Fiona swapped her Dublin lab bench for a desk in the south of France to write about other peoples' research. She is interested in anything got to do with medicine, medtech and research policy. Fiona is also a medical writer, mostly sifting through reams of data to write reports after clinical trials.

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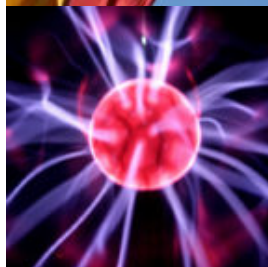


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