

Call for solidarity with RIKEN labor union's strike for withdrawal of the unfair termination of employment contracts of research and technical staffs

From RIKEN Network for Solving Fixed-Term Employment Issues (March 17, 2023)

◆RIKEN Labor Union approves exercise of the right to strike

RIKEN is finally trying to dismiss 380 research and technical staffs at the end of this month, not listening to internal and external criticisms.

The objective of this dismissal is to avoid the application of the "employment-rule with non-fixed term" that converts to an open-ended employment contract when a fixed term contract is renewed and exceeds a total of 10 years (5 years for general fixed-term employees). This is not only a labor issue, but also an act of forcibly stopping ongoing research at RIKEN, leading to a suicidal act as a research institute.

Since 2018, RIKEN labor union has collected signatures, held press conferences, made requests to the government, and negotiated with RIKEN authorities many times to withdraw the unfair termination of employment contracts. However, RIKEN is going to dismiss 380 research and technical staffs at the end of this month.

RIKEN labor union has been demanded RIKEN authorities to withdraw the unfair termination of employment contracts and approved at the union convention on March 16th that the right to strike would be exercised on March 29th in case of non-acceptance of the union's demand.

◆Mass dismissal that deals a heavy blow to Japan's research capabilities

The mass dismissal of researchers is not just a problem at RIKEN. The survey results (by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) announced on February 7 reported that at the end of this month, about 6,000 fixed-term researchers employed by national, public and private universities, research and development agencies are in danger of being dismissal. The researchers at risk of losing their jobs are all accomplished individuals who have been engaged in university teaching and research for more than a decade. The loss of these people to a place where they can utilize their abilities and experience would be an irreparable blow to Japan's research capabilities. Some researchers have already moved to foreign private companies. This is a great loss for the science community of Japan.

On the foregoing mass dismissal of researchers, RIKEN is particularly vicious. RIKEN imposed a 10-year employment cap in 2013, ignoring the opposition from RIKEN labor unions. RIKEN is now attempting to force a mass hiring freeze on this basis. Dismissal of research team leaders forces 42 research teams to disband. Sixty-eight of them will receive 105 competitive grants of 822.5 million yen from the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and other organizations for the next fiscal year. The world's most advanced research projects, such as the non-invasive detection of breast cancer by light, will be forced to halt, and the competitive funds that have been invested will be wasted.

"Tapering Nobel Prize Talent in Japan", "highly rated researchers halved and the number of Nobel Prize winners will plummet in the 2030s", the Nihon Keizai Shimbun reported on the front page of its March 5 edition. The number of Japanese papers receiving global attention has declined by 13% compared to 20 years ago, falling from 4th to 12th place in the country rankings.⁽¹⁾ Japan is the only developed (advanced) country where the

number of highly cited papers is decreasing.

Japanese research capacity is declining because fewer researchers are being hired full-time and there is no longer an environment in which they can settle down and take a long-term perspective.

If researchers are allowed to be dismissed by the unfair termination of employment contracts, even the best researchers who receive large amounts of competitive funding will only be able to work for 10 years, making them "disposable". More and more young people will not aspire to become researchers.

◆RIKEN authorities trying to create a "kick-out room" for researchers

RIKEN's plan to dismiss many researchers on the end of this month has been criticized even from overseas, with the international scientific journals "Science"⁽²⁾ and "Nature"⁽³⁾ reporting that the researchers will be "disposable".

The RIKEN authorities, backed into a corner, announced a policy titled "Introduction of New Personnel Policies" on September 30 of last year, stating that it would eliminate the employment ceiling. However, the actual "elimination of the employment ceiling" will take place on April 1. This is a sophistry designed to cover up the forced dismissal of the employment at the end of March.

The new personnel policy has indicated that there would be many new openings for research and technical staffs in the future. It was made to look as if there might be relief in the form of new positions even if they were terminated, but these expectations have been betrayed at every turn.

Of particular concern is the "research and technical support positions directly under the President of RIKEN". This is a program in which researchers who are terminated due to a 10-year employment ceiling and who wish to make a career change to a research support position are hired for only two years in a department directly under the President. This means that they are no longer eligible to proceed scientific research, even if they have received external funding from the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research. As a result, they must decline it and stop their research. In the "research and technical support positions directly under the President", the job description is not clear, and it is nothing more than a "kick-out room" that forces them to look for a job during the two-year period. RIKEN labor union is demanding the RIKEN authorities for continued employments in its current capacity.

◆Invalidation of the rule of open-ended employment contracts

RIKEN has stated that the 10-year employment ceiling will be eliminated. However, the RIKEN is attempting to justify the termination of employment by revising the employment regulations to set the maximum contract period under the name of "Assigned Project". There is a risk that the researcher will be dismissed after April, regardless of the original project period in which he or she is engaged.

If it is permissible to conclude contracts like the "Assigned Project," which imposes a maximum contract term regardless of the work, then "the rule of open-ended employment contracts" would be completely invalidated. The purpose of this rule is to change from fixed-term employees into non-fixed term employees to prevent a repeat of the "Temporary dismissal" that occurred after the Lehman Shock in the winter of 2008.

The invalidation of the rule of open-ended employment contracts through the "Assigned Project" is not only a problem for RIKEN, but also for all fixed-term employees in Japan. The introduction of this Riken's new rule

must be withdrawn.

◆RIKEN labor unions' strike- Solidarity with the exercise of our most powerful tool as a labor union

We, RIKEN Network for Solving Fixed-Term Employment Issues, are a voluntary group of citizens, labor unions, and executives of the RIKEN labor union in the Wako City area where RIKEN's headquarters is located. Since its formation in January 2019, we have been active in rallies, signatures, press conferences, and actions to request the government to stop the mass dismissal of researchers that will happen at the end of March this year, but we have not been able to stop it. However, we cannot give up. Strikes are the most powerful means for labor unions to win the maintenance and improvement of wages and working conditions.

Although fixed-term employees account for 80% of RIKEN's workforce, until now it has been a workplace where the employees could continue to work until retirement as long as they continued to achieve research results. However, with the forced dismissals, no matter how well they perform, they will not be able to work there for more than 10 years unless the president or center director approves. In fact, in hiring under the President's special exception, each center makes arbitrary recommendations, and there are no RIKEN standard criterions for who to recommend, for what reasons, for what positions, and for what working conditions. It may transform from an organization that recognizes research results to an organization that is thoroughly top-down. If RIKEN researchers do not hold together, there is no way to change this.

We support RIKEN labor union's utilization of its right to strike, guaranteed by Article 28 of the Constitution of Japan, with most forcefully expression of its intention to withdraw the unfair termination of employment contracts by RIKEN authorities. We call on all citizens to stand in solidarity with the strike!

Please use social networking and other means to spread the word “Don't allow the mass dismissal of research and technical staffs with solidarity of the RIKEN labor union’s strike”. Members of the media, please report on the illegal forced termination of employment at RIKEN.

1) ”Science and technology indicators 2022”, National Institute of Science and Technology Policy, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan, (Aug. 9th. 2022)

2) Normile, D.: Mass dismissal looms for Japanese researchers. *Science*, 377, 141 (2022).

3) Hornyak, T.: I feel disposable’: Thousands of scientists’ jobs at risk in Japan. *Nature*, 19 July 2022.