

Dear colleague:

The Venezuelan Autonomous Universities (VAU) are the country main institutions of higher education, dating, in some cases, more than two centuries, and are the main scientific institutions in our country.

Traditionally the VAU have had critical stances toward this and previous governments. This is usually the case for institutions where work is carried out by progressive intellectuals, who reject authoritarian governments, militarism, inefficiency and corruption. Therefore, it is neither factual nor fair to attach to these universities the tag of "fascists or right-wingers" as the government usually does, through a media campaign carefully programmed to create widespread confusion regarding any dissenting voice in Venezuela.

In recent years the VAU have been the object of a series of aggressive government policies that have contributed to generate a serious and profound crisis, that have also set the stage for the collapse of the entire R&D system of the country. Among these policies we can mention:

**a) Sustained financial choke.** In spite of successive devaluations of the local currency, and of the high accumulated inflation (which, only in the last five years, has been estimated in more than 130%), in the last seven years the assigned VAU-budget has remained essentially the same. As a consequence of this, the resulting financial deficit, which has been minimally covered by occasionally assigning extraordinary credits, in most of the cases the VAU receive as little as 40% of the required budget. This fact has prevented any rational planning of teaching and research activities. Furthermore, the VAU have reached the point where up to 90% of this "repeated" budget has to be used for paying salaries and student's benefits; hence, the VAU must function only with the remaining 10%. To make matters even worse, the Venezuelan government does not allow the VAU to have access to foreign currency, denying in this way access to consumable goods, parts and supplies, and equipments, which are critically dependent on foreign currency allowances, with the corresponding tremendously negative effect on R&D activities.

**b) Lack of new faculty positions.** The insufficient budget has prevented the substitution of faculty members that have resigned or gone into retirement. Very few new positions have been created, and most of them on a temporary basis, in order to prevent further student crisis. Thus, other dramatic consequences of the financial situation at the VAU are both, ageing faculty members and a decrease in their number. The real solution of these problems has been postponed by intensively using Teaching Assistantship programs for Ph.D. students, who are overworked and only receive payments amounting to less than one third of the minimum national wage. Of course this kind of answer is far from solving the real problem, and again, only alleviates temporarily the VAU teaching crisis.

**c) Collapse of the Research and Development programs.** The VAU, together with the "Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas", are responsible for more than 90% of all the scientific research in the country. According to the Web of Science, since 2008 the Venezuelan scientific production has declined 37.5%, while the number of research centers has not increased. Accordingly, in 2010 SIR ("SCIImago Instituciones Rankings") ranked Venezuela in the 6th place in scientific production among Latin-American countries; however, only one

year later, our country descended to the 7th place (after Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Cuba). In 2005, the same source ranked Venezuela in the fifth position, above Colombia, a country that has dramatically increased its scientific production, while that of Venezuela has remained stalled from 2001 to 2008, dropping afterwards precipitously. It is important to emphasize that this declining coincides with the budget crisis affecting the VAU.

**d) Austerity measures.** In March 2009, as a consequence of a drop in the oil price, President Hugo Chavez decreed the elimination of "the superfluous or sumptuary spending in the public sector". The problem was that for the VAU the definition of "sumptuary and superfluous spending" essentially included any academic activity directly or indirectly related to foreign currency spending. Thus, such activities as participating in international meetings and conferences, buying parts, supplies and equipment, accessing to Internet bandwidth, support for graduate or postdoctoral students abroad, among many others, were only exceptionally allowed after previously and explicitly authorization by the Vice-President of the Republic.

**e) Systematic aggressions.** For several years, the VAU have been the target of all kinds of aggressions from pro-government organized armed groups. Many times, in violent and uncontrolled manner, these groups have attacked pacific faculty member, student and employee protests; have assaulted University Authorities; and have even precluded access to the University facilities. Although most of these aggressions have been widely documented in written reports, photos, films and Internet web-pages, practically all of the complaints have been ignored by the authorities and the police, creating, in this way, a practice of impunity. In addition, consistently the VAU members have received harsh insults from government officials, and their activities have been systematically discredited by the official media.

**f) Government intervention in university authority elections.** According to the Constitution of the Republic of Venezuela, each VAU is autonomous to establish its own electoral rules for the election of its authorities. Nevertheless, in 2009 the government-controlled congress passed a Organic Law of Education that clashes with the right of the VAU to define their own electoral process, giving voting power to individuals, as university employees, that do not explicitly participate in the teaching-research process of the Universities, and establishing a one-student-one-vote policy, which in practice would mean that the University Authorities will be elected by employees and students. This clash between the Constitution and the Organic Law of Education has meant that all election processes have been suspended; and therefore, the authorities have not been renewed.

**g) Violation of labor agreements.** In 1982, following discussion with the faculty member's unions the government decreed the so-called "Normas de Homologación", which later on acquired character of law. Under this normative, the university salaries should be adjusted every two and a half years in accordance with the Venezuelan inflation indexes provided by the Central Bank. However, since 2006, the government has systematically ignored this law, resulting in salaries approved arbitrarily and sporadically by the government, in amounts unrelated and trailing quite behind inflation. This practice has greatly deteriorated the faculty member's salaries. Today, a beginning University professor earns, at the official currency exchange-rate, the equivalent to 530 US\$ per month, while a full professor earns 1148 US\$. However, to give a realistic idea of the university salaries is indispensable to mention that the real value of the

dollar (which determines the prices of almost all products) is nowadays from four to five times higher than the official rate, meaning that in fact, the best-paid Venezuelan professor earns less than 300 US\$ per month. At these rates, it has become utterly impossible to make a decent living and a significant number of highly-ranked scientists have left the VAU and gone abroad to continue their work. Of course, under these conditions, attracting new personnel to the Universities capable to fill up open positions has become an almost impossible task.

**h) Exclusion of the union from negotiations.** As part of its policy, the government has created a series of new unions, not stemming from authentic elections; therefore, not recognized by most of the workers. Nevertheless, it is only with these parallel unions that the government carries out any salary or working condition negotiations. In fact, this structure is exactly that of the infamous "vertical unions" created during Spanish "Franquismo". In this context, the Federation of Associations of University Professors, FAPUV, our genuine faculty-member union, has been excluded from any negotiation, and the government only addresses its decision regarding the Universities to its self-created union, or to those University Employees and Worker's unions that sympathize with the government.

Should this set of policies continue unstopped, they would mean the end of the Venezuelan higher education quality system. In view of the failure of several years of hard bargaining, after exhausting every negotiation attempts, and looking to stop this undesirable situation, the FAPUV has recently called a national University strike. This strike has been qualified as "illegal" by the government and, as a consequence of this, several of the FAPUV representatives have been taken to justice. Joining this strike are the majority of the public higher education institutions. As faculty and researchers of the Venezuelan Universities, we have decided to inform our colleagues from abroad the reasons behind the decision to escalate the conflict and initiate a strike against our employer, the Venezuelan government. This conflict is aimed at rescuing our institutions from a long-lasting crisis that, as mentioned above, in case of continuing, would lead to the destruction of the Venezuelan Autonomous University system. We have been forced to take this extreme actions due to the government policy of continuously ignoring our academic and labor demands, which is now enhanced by a discredit campaign of our protest, and by resorting to the well-known scheme of stalling real negotiation by engaging into irrelevant discussions with illegitimate, government-patronized unions, deliberately ignoring in this manner our genuine representatives.

Before finishing this letter, it is important to emphasize that throughout these years the VAU have approached the government in many ways, making great efforts to establish a constructive dialogue with the government, always trying to avoid an open conflict that would lead us to a long-term strike, with the ensuing damage to our students and our research activities. Unfortunately, the government seems to have decided to not take our demands seriously, an attitude that was made sadly clear by the newly-appointed Higher Education Minister when questioned by the press regarding the measures to be taken in order to avoid an University crisis: "Crisis? Which crisis? ", he answered.

In an attempt to make truth prevail over misinformation, we invite you to spread and discuss this document with colleagues and friends, and to join us in the fight for the survival of Venezuela's Autonomous Universities.