

End of term exams threatened

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University teachers issue the government with a two-week deadline to respond to their demands before escalating action, [Mona El-Nahhas](#) reports

During a stormy conference held at the headquarters of the Cairo University Teaching Staff Club on Friday more than 1,000 professors working at public universities and scientific research centres agreed to start direct negotiations with Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif over their demands.

Professors have been unsuccessfully calling on the government to increase their salaries, end security forces' interference in university affairs and repeal Law 82/2000, which effectively ends tenure for staff over 70, for years. In the face of empty promises they are now determined to up the ante in their campaign. Sit-ins have been organised and several meetings have taken place to discuss how best to force the government's hand. During Friday's meeting it was decided to allow a two-week grace period for officials to respond to their demands.

"Another conference will be held -- as soon as the deadline ends -- to decide the steps to be taken should the government fail to come up with positive proposals," Adel Abdel-Gawwad, chairman of the Cairo University Teaching Staff Club, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

Measures being considered, he said, include a series of sit-ins, protests in front of the presidential palace and People's Assembly and work stoppages.

Some teachers, says Abdel-Gawwad, were in favour of boycotting the marking of first term examinations scheduled for the end of December, while a larger group argued that they should bide their time until the government clarified its position. "We thought it better to wait and see where our meeting with Nazif leads," revealed Abdel-Gawwad.

Many university professors, after seeing their living standards eroded, have abandoned state universities for private institutions, leading to severe staff shortages. Others work for several institutions simultaneously, rushing between different institutions to deliver lectures. Cases have been reported of professors offering private off-campus lessons and even selling copies of exam papers to students.

"If they keep on neglecting our financial demands higher education in Egypt will be destroyed," Abdel-Gawwad warned.

Sixty parliamentary members announced earlier this week that they fully support the demands of university teachers. They called for the People's Assembly to convene in emergency session to discuss the situation, warning that in the absence of action the situation will deteriorate. The MPs -- many of them university professors -- urged Minister of Higher Education Hani Helal to meet disgruntled professors and reach a settlement ahead of first term exams.

During Friday's conference the assembled professors agreed that they should press MPs to adopt their demands and that they should open a petition in support of their position.

The conference called for monthly salaries of LE3,000 to be doubled and for a pension fund to be established to supplement the income of professors over 70 whose pensions are capped at LE800. Conference participants also expressed concern at continued interventions on campus by state security officers, urging university teachers to send letters of protest to the relevant university administrations reporting such violations and, should they continue, to respond by organising sit-ins. The conference recommended teachers to do everything in their power to protect their students from persecution by security personnel, and demanded that heads of department and faculty deans be elected rather than appointed after gaining security approval. The conference also agreed to petition President Hosni Mubarak and other senior officials on behalf of colleagues standing trial before military courts.