

Dear Colleagues,

The closure of Quebec's university network is a first. And there is no doubt that the work that each of the FQPPU member unions and associations will have to do in the near future with the professors at each university will be just as exceptional.

In these unprecedented circumstances, the FQPPU will accompany you on a regular basis during the closure of our establishments, and beyond. I therefore invite you to contact me to let me know about your particular situations and your suggestions. As much as possible, the FQPPU team will try to help you.

This weekend, the FQPPU was proactive and we made interventions with the office of the Minister of Education and Higher Education (MEES), Mr. Jean-François Roberge. Here are the highlights.

### **Duration of interruption**

Based on our understanding of the available scientific analysis and our discussions with the MEES office, the duration of the closure could be significant, possibly several weeks or even months. We will update you periodically.

### **Conflicting instructions**

Moreover, the last few days have been turbulent and fertile in the most diverse, or contradictory, instructions within the university network. Here is a small summary of the actions taken by your Federation over the weekend.

On the evening of Friday, 13 March a telephone meeting convened by Minister Roberge took place with the heads of higher education institutions, which I attended as the only invited representative of the professors. The meeting confirmed that the Government of Quebec was requesting the closure of the universities until March 27 inclusively. In spite of this, several university administrations subsequently issued instructions, some of which were exemplary and very clear, while others were rather confusing or engaged professors in risky avenues, including the obligation for our members to put their courses online or to offer all university courses and training at a distance during the next two weeks.

On Sunday, March 15, at about 1:00 p.m., the MEES specified in a written instruction addressed to the school principals the following: "With respect to the higher education network, CEGEPs, colleges and universities are also closed until March 27 inclusively. Thus, for the next two weeks, all unnecessary or non-essential teaching and research activities are suspended in universities, CEGEPs and colleges. »

### **FQPPU requests to the MEES**

In our telephone interviews with the MEES, we first of all pointed out that university faculty members are both sensitive and understanding of the current exceptional health crisis. We also stressed the spirit of collaboration and openness of our members for the future.

On the other hand, we have asked the MEES to specify in future communications that **the measures to be taken affecting teaching and research in the various academic institutions should be established in consultation with faculty representatives from local unions and associations.** Departmental staff listened carefully to this request and showed consideration for our request.

We will work with all of you to ensure that this is the case in the coming weeks.

The FQPPU cannot accept that the good faith and spirit of collaboration of professors be interpreted as a renunciation of their working conditions established in the collective agreements, nor that the latter be set aside or modified unilaterally by the employer in the context of an emergency. University administrations will need to work with the elected representatives of each of the unions and faculty associations to establish a concerted approach to teaching and research for the coming weeks.

### **Online courses mandatory or not?**

Furthermore, specifically on the issue of distance learning, we have urged DSEE to ask for the correction of certain important elements of the communiqués in circulation concerning distance learning:

- we asked that the "optional" and not "imperative" nature of the ministerial instructions addressed to the management of university institutions with regard to distance education (putting courses online, adoption of this type of pedagogical formula, etc.) be clearly specified;
- we argued that these are working conditions that cannot be unilaterally set by plant management without negotiation with union representatives, since they are subject to negotiated employment contracts;
- **we have argued that the choice of pedagogical vehicle (face-to-face, online, etc.) is a decision that falls within the academic freedom of professors and that none of our members should be forced to put their teaching online or to give their courses at a distance from home.**

Some peculiarities have been highlighted to raise the awareness of the MEES, namely that teachers may be in one or more situations preventing them from working remotely due to the conditions of the health emergency : Symptomatic teachers quarantined on return from a stay abroad, teachers over 70 years of age having to follow the Prime Minister's instructions, teachers with young children deprived of childcare, teachers acting as natural caregivers during the crisis, teachers who do not have access at home to the resources and conditions for working remotely, etc. The MEES seems to have recorded that these situations will affect many colleagues and that therefore situations of inequity between institutions or between colleagues cannot be created in the current context. The closure of universities must be real and the planning stage of making up for the cancelled courses will follow in due course as this planning is neither essential nor urgent at this time.

Since this request, Minister Roberge spoke at a press conference at about 4:00 p.m. and cleared up any ambiguity on this subject: **"the instruction we give to school principals is that you cannot force teachers to give lessons from home"**.

So **online courses or distance learning are not mandatory.**

We understand from that that our interventions have been heard. However, let us remain vigilant collectively for what comes next.

In respect of your autonomy, I would like to suggest that you communicate this information to your members in order to reassure them and prevent practices that do not comply with the employment contracts in force from being implemented without your knowledge.

I also invite you to contact me if you feel the need to do so.

That is all for tonight. More news will follow.

Yours sincerely and in solidarity

**Jean Portugais**

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