



SYNDICAT NATIONAL DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR  
*FRENCH NATIONAL UNION OF HIGHER EDUCATION*

# France's Clear Decline in Academic Freedom

2025 CAUT CONFERENCE - CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL  
KNOWLEDGE AND POWER: THE INTERNATIONAL STRUGGLE FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM – CALGARY – FEBRUARY 7-8, 2025

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# Academic Freedom: A Labour Issue & A Democratic One

The increasing attacks on academic freedom raise a democratic issue:

- Ever-increasing and ever more brutal threats towards teaching and research faculty and every combination thereof, with a rise in religious, political and economic fanaticism
- **In France, recent efforts to muzzle higher education:** the threats are many and attacks against both individuals and the profession as a whole have increased.

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## Declining academic freedom is an issue that affects everyone

**We know** that academic freedom is an essential condition for any democratic society, just as artistic freedom, freedom of association, or freedom of the press.

**We can see** that they are simultaneously under attack.

The question of academic freedom (in the plural) or, if we consider them as a whole, academic freedom (in the singular) is that of the **conditions for the production, transmission and use of knowledge.**

This is a democratic issue, since it concerns the conditions for the development of critical thought.

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## Fundamental Issues of Equality

At the heart of the democratic question posed by academic freedom are trade union issues. Two of these, for example, are at the heart of our concerns :

- **Fighting against precarity:** No matter their status, anyone in our profession must benefit from academic freedom as a fundamental condition of their work.
- **Promoting equality:** The issue of women's academic freedoms, their access to director roles in labs and training responsibilities, and thus their actual power to make decisions and set orientations must also be examined in the context of declining and increasingly restrictive working conditions, including terms of employment and remuneration.

Academic freedom raises the central question: who decides?

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# Defending Academic Freedom in the Present Moment

*You will find a longer version of our analysis in the **conference documents**.*

*I will concentrate here on illustrating the form that the attacks on academic freedom are taking in France today and our thoughts on the matter.*

1. Characterizing the attacks against academic freedoms
2. Strengthening union action

# 1. Characterizing the Attacks against Academic Freedom

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In France, attacks against academic freedom have been increasing in recent years

The Minister of Higher Education and Research even attempted to intimidate the academic and university community...

... thereby opening the gates to multiple hostile actions against academics and stoking the far-right and other populist movements

# An Emblematic Example: The “Islamism-Leftism” Affair

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Background: Murder of Samuel Paty, a teacher, on October 16, 2020, five years after the trauma of the January and November attacks in 2015. Several proposals for measures fighting against religious fanaticism emerged from the ensuing media debate.

- The Minister of Education steered the debate towards higher education: as early as October 22, he publicly stated that “Islamism-leftism is wreaking havoc in universities.” That same day in the Senate, he referred to “very powerful Islamism-leftist currents in postsecondary education that are ravaging minds.”
- The discourse shifted to point the finger at “ideologies that were born within the university,” including “political correctness” (!), cancel culture...

- In early 2021, a major right-wing daily used the term “Islamism” on its front page, nodding to far-right vocabulary rather than speaking to an actual concept
- Our Minister of Higher Education said on February 14, 2021, “I think Islamism is eating away at our society and universities are not exempt from this—they're part of society.”
- In one month, 3 of its front pages focused on the university, associating it with words like “gangrene,” “decline,” and “dogma.”
- She announced that she would officially call for an investigation ‘into all academic research on these subjects in order to distinguish academic research from activism and opinion’.




Acnimed, "Universities Under Threat from 'Islamism'? A well-worn media conspiracy," March 2, 2021



# Uninhibited Populism

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- The National Centre for Scientific Research immediately reacted, clarifying that the term “Islamism” had “no basis in academic reality” and lamenting this “weaponization of science.”
- However, some far-right populist groups were already sharing lists of several hundred academics and researchers who were alleged to belong to this category... along with links to their labs and universities.
- In 2023, following a complaint lodged with the Council of State, the legal director of the Ministry of Higher Education drew up a statement of defence in which he explained that the Minister's remarks should be considered as mere comments, which had not given rise to any concrete follow-up.

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- In so many words, the Ministry was forced to concede that it was simply an attempt at intimidation... all the while providing institutional legitimacy for what amounted to a far-right insult towards academics, fomenting distrust towards the university community and aligning itself with the most hackneyed populism.
  - It cast ideological doubt on a whole swath of research, in particular social sciences research.
  - This did not go without consequences on the work.
  - Our own ministry, far from protecting universities, labs and staff, sought instead to discredit them.

APRIL 2024

In April 2024, a Conservative deputy, Patrick HETZEL, proposed to create a 30-member commission of enquiry to study “ideological and Islamo-leftist inspired entryism into higher education.”

Motivations:

- Claiming that universities are “**under an ideological dictatorship that disguises political aims,**” and “a rejection of the laws of the Republic.”
- All while referring to the legally upheld independence of higher education from any political influence...

Patrick HETZEL went on to be named Minister of Higher Education and research in September 2024



N° 2528

ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE

CONSTITUTION DU 4 OCTOBRE 1958

SEIZIÈME LÉGISLATURE

Enregistré à la Présidence de l'Assemblée nationale le 24 avril 2024.

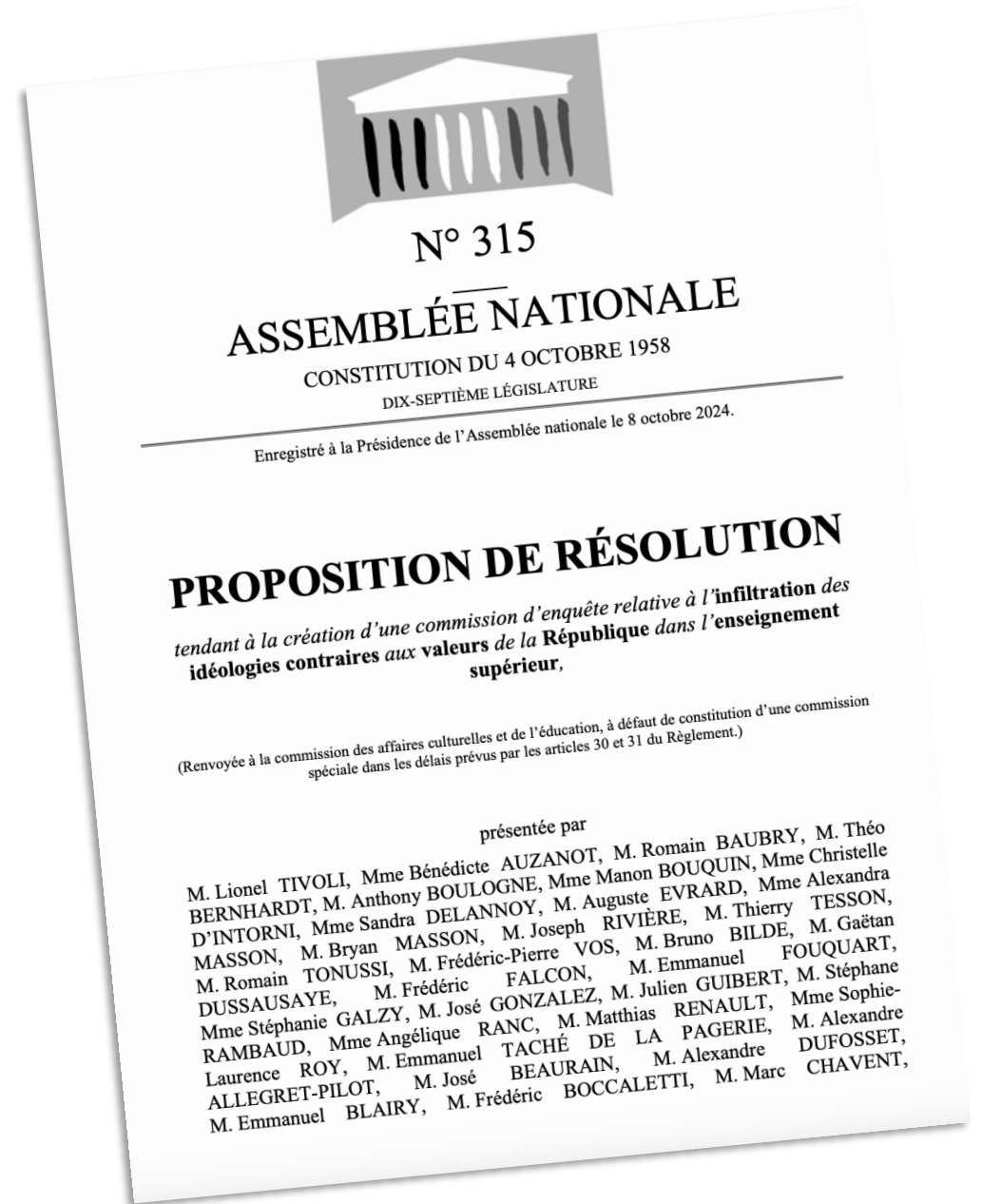
## PROPOSITION DE RÉSOLUTION

*tendant à la création d'une commission d'enquête relative à l'entrisme idéologique et aux dérives islamogauchistes dans l'enseignement supérieur,*

*(Renvoyée à la commission des affaires culturelles et de l'éducation, à défaut de constitution d'une commission spéciale dans les délais prévus par les articles 30 et 31 du Règlement.)*

présentée par  
Mme Michèle TABAROT, M. Patrick HETZEL,  
députés.

In October 2024, the far right took over the project by proposing a commission of enquiry to study “the infiltration into higher education of ideologies that run counter to the values of the Republic.”



A second example

Agricultural business owners, essentially agribusiness industry promoters, turn on a research institution, building a wall to block its entrances:  
“We're funding a national institute [...] and all we get in return are restrictions”

**Un mur de parpaings a été érigé devant l'Inrae à Paris par une centaine d'agriculteurs. Un geste symbolique pour eux.**

Plus d'une **centaine d'agriculteurs** ont érigé ce jeudi 28 novembre à l'aube un mur de parpaings pour bloquer symboliquement l'entrée de l'Inrae, l'Institut national de la recherche pour l'agriculture, l'alimentation et l'environnement.

En théorie, "des instituts comme l'Inrae peuvent nous donner des moyens de remplir notre fonction de producteurs", or "ce n'est plus le cas. Depuis des années, c'est la décroissance qui est organisée", a lancé avec un haut-parleur Pascal Verrière, secrétaire adjoint de la FDSEA Seine-et-Marne.

**"On finance un institut national à un milliard d'euros par an qui ne nous rapporte que des contraintes", a renchéri Donatien Moyson, coprésident des JA IDF Ouest, auprès de l'AFP.**

To the researchers who had published an article in the press explaining their missions and the social importance of their work, the agricultural union fires back:

“dogmatic research,”

“green lobby,”

“reorient research to benefit French farmers.”

**Le Journal du Dimanche**

SOCIÉTÉ

# «Les agriculteurs ont besoin d'une recherche publique non dogmatique»

TRIBUNE. En réponse à une tribune de chercheurs de l'Inrae, Damien Greffin, président de la FRSEA Île-de-France, alerte sur les orientations de l'établissement public et l'appelle à réorienter sa recherche vers des solutions au service de l'agriculture française.

Damien Greffin  
23/01/2025 à 16:58, Mis à jour le 23/01/2025 à 18:33

dernier, 240 chercheurs de l'Institut de recherche agronomique et environnemental prônent « des transitions radicales et structurelles » de l'agriculture. Ils entendent le dernier avec un groupe d'agriculteurs.

« Aider à produire pour nourrir » devrait être l'ADN de la recherche agronomique publique. Malheureusement, ce n'est plus le cas depuis de nombreuses années. Le négatif sur l'acte de production et la souveraineté alimentaire nationale.

**Les agriculteurs ont besoin d'une recherche publique non dogmatique**  
Oui, nous sommes confrontés au dérèglement climatique avec toutes les conséquences associées. L'activité agricole est en première ligne face à la multiplication de produits phytopharmaceutiques. Nous avons besoin de solutions de traitement qui ne trouveront aucun agriculteur qui ne souhaite pas s'engager dans des démarches vertueuses pour baisser son bilan carbone. Les initiatives que nous mettons en œuvre le prouvent.

Non, les efforts à consentir ne doivent pas avoir pour conséquence le sacrifice de l'agriculture française. Il y va de notre capacité à pouvoir se nourrir demain sans paupérisation de notre balance commerciale agricole nous alerte chaque année. À force de se mettre des bâtons dans les roues, les roues ne tournent plus. À titre d'exemple, nous n'avons pas besoin d'une baisse drastique de l'usage des produits phytopharmaceutiques. Nous avons besoin de solutions de traitement qui nous permettent de continuer à produire.

Nous n'avons pas besoin d'une baisse drastique des intrants azotés. Nous avons besoin de techniques d'amendements azotés décarbonés à l'impact environnemental réduit. Nous n'avons pas besoin d'une baisse drastique du nombre de nos ruminants. Nous avons besoin d'une meilleure performance génétique du cheptel avec un impact environnemental réduit et assure une grande partie de la fertilisation organique des productions en agriculture biologique.

**Au sein de l'Inrae, les chercheurs de talent ne manquent pas. Mais certains d'entre eux ont fait le choix de la radicalité dans leurs orientations de recherche.**

**Le « lobby vert » n'a de cesse de jeter le discrédit sur l'agriculture française**  
**Les agriculteurs ont besoin d'une recherche publique non dogmatique, avec des solutions efficaces,** peu onéreuses dans leur application et non chronophages.

Ces quelques chercheurs de l'Inrae ont beau jeu de dénoncer des lobbies omettant de préciser que le premier groupe de pression, par l'étendue de son réseau, est le lobby agricole. **De Bruxelles à Paris, ce lobby tentaculaire et multiforme n'a de cesse de jeter le discrédit, à chaque maillon de la société civile et politique, sur l'agriculture française.** souffrir de pénuries alimentaires depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale, avec des prix modérés et une sécurité sanitaire reconnue dans le monde entier. L'Inrae fait-il partie des 1 000 agences pointées par François Bayrou dans son discours de politique générale qui exercent l'action publique « sans contrôle démocratique » ? **Pour l'Inrae, cela signifiera réorienter (enfin) sa recherche au bénéfice des agriculteurs.** mouvement de débureaucratisation » souhaité par le Premier ministre.



# Multiple Attacks

Of these two examples, which is the most worrying? **Does these examples sufficiently “characterize” recent attacks in France? Unfortunately, no.** There is much more to share:

- **Declarations of power, starting with those from our president** (“leave all academic freedom to the best.”)
- **A real desire to muzzle** has emerged in recently under the guise of concerns about importing the Israel-Palestine conflict (documented in our publications).
- Within the leadership of local authorities, policies **seek to impose charters** (once again under the guise of “respect for the values of the Republic”) which provide conditions for funding.

- Actions, starting with some university presidents, to excluding some colleagues from their university research labs, strategic lawsuits,...
- The association of university presidents thought it could take advantage of the situation to ask to have academic freedom at the institution level protected by the Constitution, which, in France, **would amount to constitutionalizing institutional autonomy.**
- **Many forms of economic threats and intimidation from businesses,** Professionalization of continuing education, which can accompany economic interference that threatens freedom of instruction.
- **The very organization of universities and their funding,** funding models for research which have become completely erratic.
- ....



The situation in France today is characterized by:

- **A rise in far-right ideas and in anti-intellectual populism**, growth in far-right media: several head-on attacks against academia and researchers with the goal of delegitimizing knowledge,
- **Structures for research and higher education that were designed and organized as a public service, now stymied** from fulfilling their missions, as many public services, and on track to starvation due to a lack of recruitment and funding,
- Authoritarian dominance over universities' leadership, with **all the brutal trappings of neo-management**.



# 2. Strengthening Union Action

## Mobilizing and Alerting Academia *Rights must be defended to remain strong*

Because freedoms are never guaranteed and must constantly be reaffirmed:

Convincing our colleagues of the importance of joining a union: there is sometimes an illusion of statutory and legal protection, but individualism is a serious threat to universities. While legal protections are important, they will always be weak if they are not defended by a profession.

# Many questions are being asked in our professions

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(1) **The contours of our academic freedom** : For the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, academic freedom is understood as a condition for the full realization of the right to education.

(2) **A freedom of speech Intra- and Extramural?** But is one possible without the other? This directly raises the question of whether our freedom is statutory or functional. And, here again, it seems to us that one cannot exist without the other.

(3) There is the impact of the deterioration in our working conditions and its consequences. For example, new power dynamics have appeared (for example, between the precariously and statutorily employed), leading to new dynamics within communities, which could fracture solidarity. However, **collegiality is a condition for academic freedom.**

# Affirming the Democratic Question

- Government use of legal or media pressure to intimidate research and academic institutions (or repress them) would generally fall under the repression of fundamental rights.
- Hostility from governments or States helps create a climate of hostility towards academics. In most cases, hostility towards researchers weaponizes and encourages **hostility towards minorities**.
- **This hardening of power is upheld by legal and disciplinary procedures:** in France, “denunciations” to justice have increased.
- **We're also seeing governments' willingness to prevent us from asking them for accountability.**
- Academic freedom is an issue that affects all of society: There is no free society, no democracy, without academic freedom, just as there wouldn't be without freedom of the press, freedom of association, the right to protest, artistic freedom...
- The interest in commodifying and creating competition between academics, and the accompanying reforms, are above all political in nature, rather than technical.

# International Union Solidarity: A Necessity

- Collaborating on Promoting Our Shared Baseline:
  - Affirming the non-negotiable conditions needed to produce knowledge and practice our profession
  - At the international level, a necessary reaffirmation of the conditions needed for academic freedom to exist and be exercised and its important role in democratic society.
- Joint actions organized by and with EI.
  - Through interventions on international legislation
  - Through international union action
  - Directed at governments, institutions and employers
  - Through the organization of an international day of advocacy for academic freedom to reach both within and without institutional bounds, our colleagues, political leaders, journalists and the general public?

# The INAF Network Currently Meeting in Dakar



- Founded in 2020, the International Network for Academic Freedom (INAF) includes several academic unions, many of which are members of Education International (EI-IE).
- The network organizes several events, and an international seminar is held every year on February 8, International Academic Freedom Day.
- The event on February 8, 2025, is organized at the invitation of Senegal's Syndicat autonome de l'Enseignement Supérieur (SAES) around the theme: Academic freedom in the face of political interference.
- SNESUP-FSU is also in attendance and made a reciprocal note of today's event in Calgary.

**International Network for Academic Freedom (INAF)**

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# Defending and Promoting University and Academic Values.

- Alongside freedom of the press, freedom of culture and freedom of association, academic freedom is conditional to healthy democracy—it's a sign of its vitality.
- There's also a union issue in the fight against the delegitimization of knowledge and of the university tradition of "searching for truth," or in efforts to devalue the profession by some political figures.
- In such a context, it is our responsibility to defend the university as a site of knowledge production and transmission, where the independence and academic freedom of instructors and researchers is respected, and to defend the university and research as sites for debate, where critical thinking and international cooperation are developed.

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