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Paris, January 16 (RHC)-- Protesters have taken to the streets in cities across France to reject a law that would see the implementation of tighter restrictions on people not vaccinated against COVID-19, as Parliament continues to debate the draft bill.

Thousands took part in demonstrations on Saturday, with an array of disparate political groups rallying together. In the capital, Paris, where the largest single gathering set off from near the Eiffel Tower, the protest was called by anti-EU presidential candidate Florian Philippot.

Other protests harked back to the “yellow vests” movement of 2018-19 against President Emmanuel Macron’s planned economic reforms, and there were further gatherings in big cities including Bordeaux, Toulouse and Lille.

People in the crowd chanted “no to the vaccine” or “freedom for Djokovic”, seizing on the case of world men’s tennis number one Novak Djokovic, who is fighting the Australian government to compete unvaccinated in the Grand Slam Australian Open. “Novak is kind of our standard-bearer at the moment,” demonstrator Pascal told the AFP news agency in Bordeaux.

He was marching alongside parents with children at a tennis club in the western city, where he said the coach risks losing his job for refusing vaccination.

In Paris, demonstrators bore French and regional flags, with banners bearing messages like “it’s not the virus they want to control, it’s you.” Two demonstrators, Laurence and Claire, told AFP they were vaccinated “but we’re against the pass for teenagers, we don’t see why they’re being vaccinated because they aren’t in danger.”

While officials had not published an estimate of nationwide turnout by late afternoon, police or local authorities counted about 1,000 each in Lyon, Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseille. Demonstrators were hoping to outstrip the 105,000 who hit the streets last weekend, some possibly mobilised by Macron’s declaration in a newspaper interview that he wanted to “piss off” the unvaccinated with new restrictions until they accepted a coronavirus shot.

Members in the National Assembly cleared the vaccine pass bill to the upper house in the early hours of Saturday. The Senate is likely to pass it finally on Sunday after a back-and-forth between the two houses over questions like the minimum age for the pass and whether proprietors should be empowered to check customers’ identities.

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