

Massive protest in Paris against inflation and climate crisis

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Demonstrators take part in a protest by New Ecologic and Social People's Union (NUPES), a coalition of left and green parties, against soaring inflation and what they call a lack of government action to fight climate change in Paris on Sunday [Stephane Mahe/Reuters]?

Paris, October 16 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands of protesters marched in Paris adding to growing defiance and anger about inflation, three weeks into a refinery strike that caused fuel shortages across France. The demonstration against the rising cost of living on Sunday was called by the left-wing political opposition and led by the head of the France Unbowed party, Jean-Luc Melenchon.

It was a show of anger against the bite of rising prices and to crank up the pressure on the government of President Emmanuel Macron. Organisers called it a “march against the high cost of living and climate inaction.”

As well as calling for massive investment against the climate crisis, they also demanded emergency measures against high prices, including freezes in the costs of energy, essential goods and rent, and for greater taxation of windfall profits by corporations.

Some protesters wore yellow florescent vests, the symbol of often violent anti-government protests in 2018 that shook Macron’s pro-business centrist government. Opponents of Macron are hoping to build on the momentum created by the refinery standoff that began at the end of September.

Transport strikes called to take place on Tuesday threaten to dovetail with wage strikes that have already hobbled fuel refineries and depots, sparking chronic gasoline shortages that are fraying nerves among millions of workers and other motorists dependent on their vehicles, with giant lines forming at petrol stations.

“We’re going to have a week the likes of which we don’t see very often,” Melenchon said from atop a truck in the middle of the crowd. “Everything is coming together. We are starting it with this march, which is an immense success.”

Organisers said 140,000 people attended Sunday’s rally. Police earlier predicted about 30,000 people would attend. Demonstrating at Melenchon’s side was French author Annie Ernaux, who won the Nobel Prize for literature this year. Melenchon said Macron’s leadership is plunging France into “chaos”.

Macron’s government is on the defensive in parliament, where it lost its majority in legislative elections in June. That is making it much harder for his centrist alliance to implement his domestic agenda against strengthened opponents, and parliamentary discussion of the government’s budget plan for next year is proving particularly difficult.

Several French unions, but not all, have announced a national day of strikes on Tuesday that is expected to affect road transport, trains and the public sector. The strikes and protests are being closely watched by the government, which is aiming to push through a highly controversial change to the pensions system in the next few months.

Macron, who won re-election in April, has pledged to push back the retirement age from 62, with the reform scheduled before the end of the winter. “I’m really worried,” one governing party lawmaker said on condition of anonymity. “We need to find a route between the need for reforms and the fact that people are riled up and tired.”

Many companies have cut back on travel and deliveries, while even emergency service vehicles face shortages. The huge profits made by energy groups from record fuel prices have led to some sympathy for employees pushing for higher wages. But one poll by the BVA polling group released on Friday suggested only 37 percent of people supported the stoppages.

Sunday’s protest march through Paris was called by Melenchon’s party and is backed by its coalition allies – the Greens, Socialists and Communists.

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