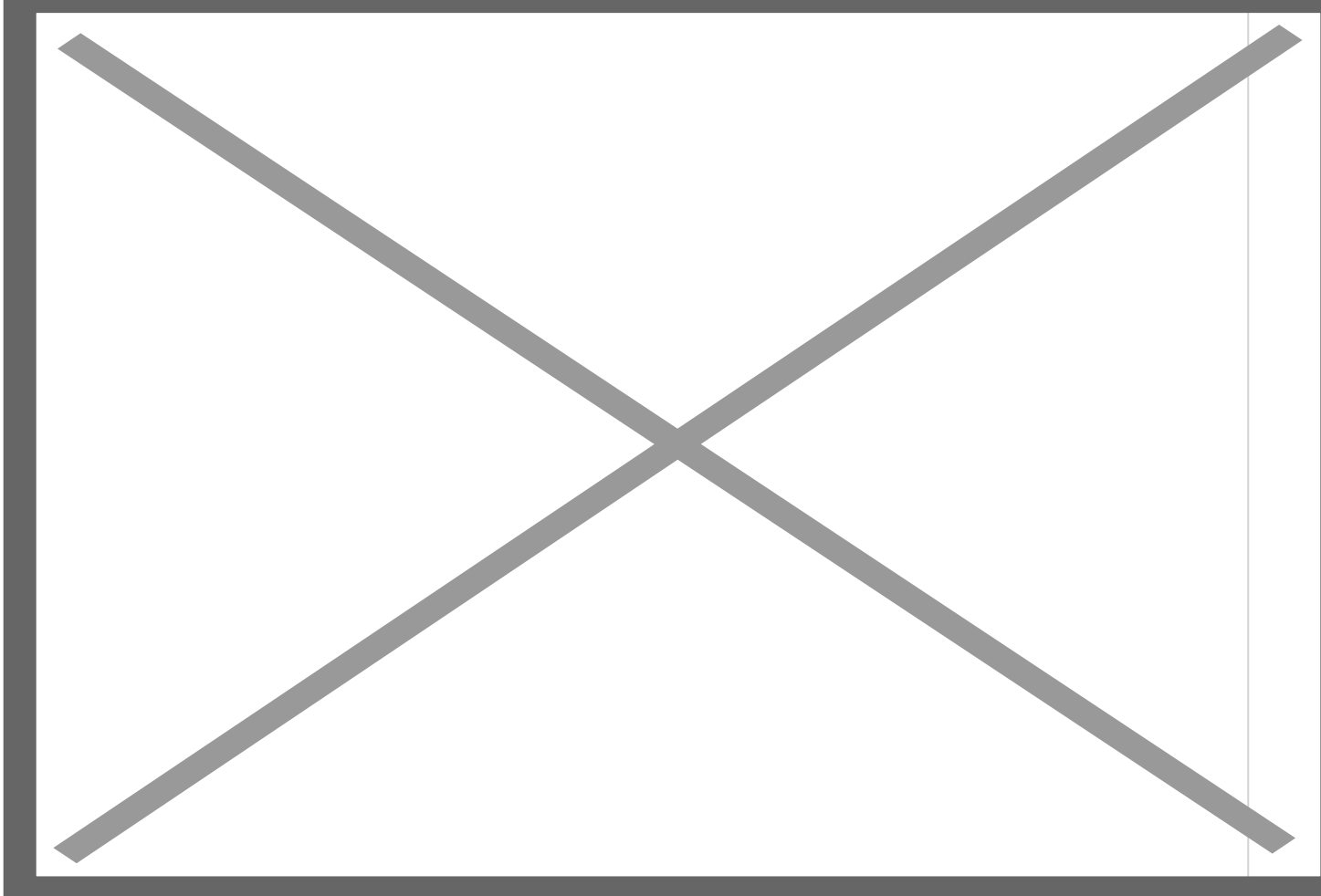


French workers, angered by Macron's pension plan, strike en masse

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A woman holds a placard that reads, 'Retirement is 60', during a rally called by French trade unions in Montpellier, southern France [Pascal Guyot/AFP]

Paris, January 20 (RHC)-- Teachers, train drivers, and refinery workers in France are among those who have joined a nationwide day of strikes, as anger rages over the government's plans to raise the pension age by two years to 64.

The protests are a major test for President Emmanuel Macron, who maintains that his pension reform plan – which is highly unfavourable in opinion polls, with 68 percent of people against an increase – is crucial for the economy.

French trade unions called for Thursday's mass mobilisation. The last time they did that was 12 years ago, when the retirement age was increased from 60 to 62. "We need a lot of people to join the protests," Laurent Berger, head of France's largest union, CFDT, told BFM TV. "People are against this reform ... we need to show it [in the streets]."

While French labour ministry estimates say retirement reform would bring in an additional 17.7bn euros (\$19.1 billion) in annual pension contributions, allowing the system to break even by 2027, unions say there are other ways to ensure the viability of the pension system, such as increasing taxes for the superrich.

Twelve of France's biggest unions joined hands to lead the protest. One leader of the protest said: "We are hoping to turn this protest into some sort of broader social movement combining concerns about the continuing cost-of-living crisis to really put pressure on the president."

"President Macron has always cast himself as a reformer. In his first run for the presidency, he said he would reform France. He tried to push through pension reforms, and other reforms, in his first term. [But] protests stopped him doing that, and then the pandemic stopped him doing that. So [in] his second term, he's trying again."

For Macron, the pension plans put his reformist credentials at stake, both in the country and among his European Union peers, as a way to keep public spending down.

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