France hit by another Million March against Macron’s pension plan

Paris, January 31 (RHC)-- France is being hit by major transport disruptions on Tuesday as nationwide protests have been held across the country second time in less than a month aimed at forcing the government to back down on a controversial pension plan.

Around one million workers are set to stage the second round of nationwide strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's plan to increase the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64 years as part of a reform package. The legal retirement age in France is currently 62 — lower than in many developed countries, including much of Europe and the United States.

More than two million people marched in French cities on January 19th to decry the government's plans, which halted trains, blocked refineries and curbed power generation across the country. French police used tear gas and batons to disperse the demonstrations, including in the capital city of Paris.

The country's leading trade unions called for a second day of strikes on January 31 in an attempt to force Macron and his government to reverse the plans.

“The unions call on all the population to mobilize itself in an even more massive way on the 31st of January, to say no to this unfair reform,” General Confederation of Labour (CGT) workers union head Philippe Martinez said at an event on Wednesday.

The industrial action across different sectors on Tuesday will bring to a halt trains and metros as well as cut electricity production. According to the leading teachers' union, around half of all nursery and primary school teachers will also go on strike.

In the capital Paris, some metro stations will be closed as the suburban rail services will be severely restricted, according to reports. French National Railway Company (SNCF) announced that intercity travel will be heavily disrupted as only one in three high-speed trains will be at work.

The unions are hoping for the participation of over one million demonstrators in more than 200 cities across France.

An increase in the minimum retirement age to 64 from the current 62 is the main part of the reform package pushed by Macron to ensure the future financing of the country's pensions system. While unions have welcomed the government's readiness for negotiation on parts of the plan, they say the proposed 64-year rule must be reversed.

Union protests against the change brought out more than one million people onto the streets in the first major strike this month across France on January 19th. According to a new poll by the OpinionWay survey group, a 3 percent increase since January 12 illustrate that the movement is gaining ground as 61 percent of French people support the protest movement.

The stoppages are a major test for Macron, who says his pension reform plan is vital to ensure the system does not go bust. The package comes amid high inflation, a rise in the cost of living, and with the country still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Protestors argue there are other ways to ensure the viability of the pension system such as taxing the super-rich or increasing employers' contributions or those of well-off pensioners.

French parliamentary committees started examining the draft law on Monday. The left-wing opposition has submitted more than 7,000 amendments to the draft in order to slow its passage through parliament.

Macron's allies, who do not have an absolute majority in parliament, will need votes from conservatives to get their pensions plan approved. Another option for the government is forcing the bill through without a vote under special constitutional powers. However, in that case, it would face the risk of a vote of no confidence and possibly new parliamentary elections.

“French people are against (the reform), they are even more opposed to it this time around, and so, everything contributes to ensuring that next Tuesday's mobilization is a significant one, at least as significant as the one that we saw in the first demonstration and strike movement,” pollster Jean-Daniel Levy, from polling institute Harris Interactive France, was quoted as saying by Reuters on Monday.

“In the COVID period, the idea that public deficits could be relaxed in the name of general interest has made or given the impression that, at the present time, the situation did not appear to be serious enough with regard to the pay-as-you-go pension system to act solely from an economic point of view,” Levy said.

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