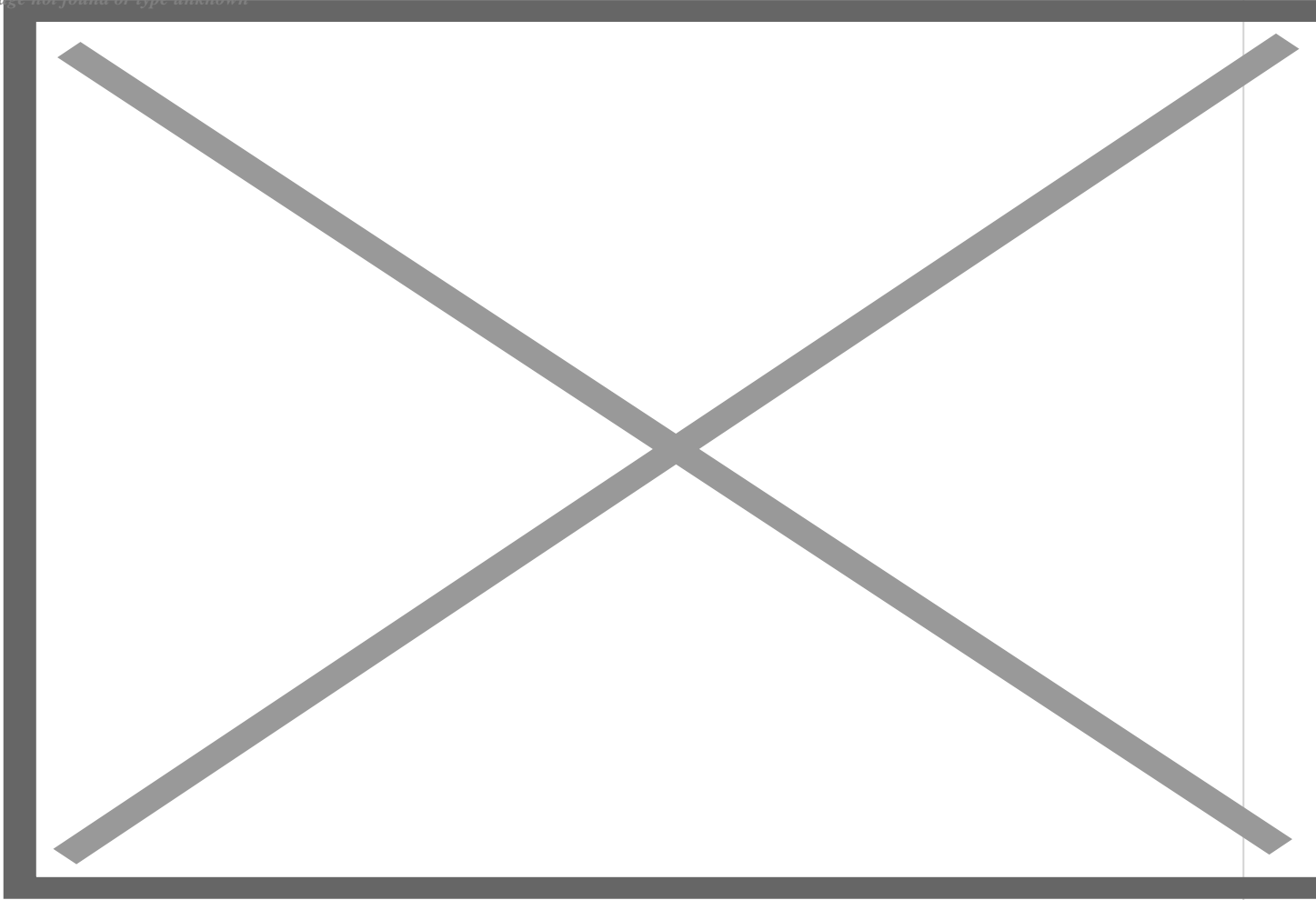


Anger boils as France adopts pension plan without vote

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Paris, March 17 (RHC)-- Police fired tear gas at protesters on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, where some 7,000 people demonstrated against the government's pension changes in a spontaneous and unplanned rally. Reports said cobble stones were being thrown at the police, who charged to break up groups of protesters.

The demonstration was across the river Seine from parliament, where Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne earlier on Thursday announced her government would push through the reform using a special

constitution clause.

The government used a special procedure to push its pensions reform without a vote.

The unexpected move by the administration of President Emmanuel Macron, using the so-called article 49:3 of the constitution, revealed that his government failed to secure enough of a majority in parliament.

Article 49.3 of the French Constitution enables a government to push a bill through the National Assembly without a vote. The only alternative to prevent the bill from passing is then to overthrow the government.

What Borne did in the National Assembly, after weeks of protests and fractious debate, drew shouts from left-wing legislators brandishing placards against the reform inside the parliament and outrage outside, where unions announced a fresh round of strikes and rallies.

The surprise maneuver dealt a significant blow to Macron's leadership and his ability to win support from other parties for further reforms. Borne's speech at the parliament was largely drowned out by boos and chants from opposition members of parliament and shouts of "resignation," in rare chaotic scenes in the French parliament.

"We cannot gamble on the future of our pensions, this reform is necessary," she told lawmakers. In response, far-right leader Marine Le Pen, among others, said Borne should step down. "This last-minute resort to 49:3 is an extraordinary sign of weakness," Le Pen said. "She must go."

Through his proposed reforms, Macron is pushing to raise the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64, saying it is vital if the country is to avoid the collapse of the state pension system. Raising the retirement age by two years and extending the pay-in period would yield an additional 17.7 billion euros (\$19.18 billion) in annual pension contributions, allowing the system to break even by 2027, according to Labor Ministry estimates.

"By resorting to 49:3, the government demonstrates that it does not have a majority to approve the two-year postponement of the legal retirement age," Laurent Berger, the leader of CFDT, France's main union, said on Twitter, urging authorities to "listen to the workers."

Opinion polls show that two-thirds of the French people oppose the reform and support a protest movement organized by trade unions, who have unified behind their opposition and have warned they will continue their mobilization.

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