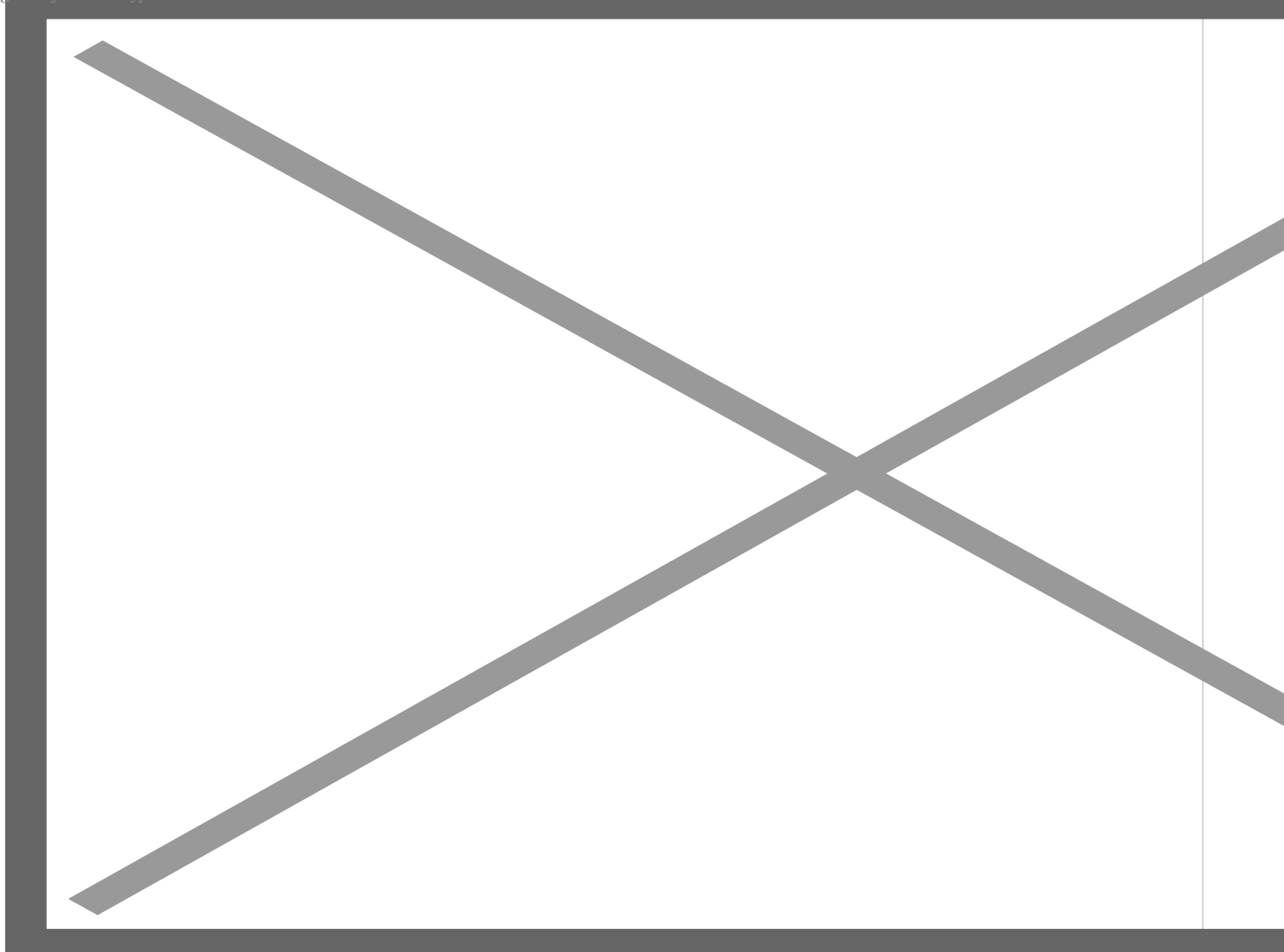


French farmers to mount siege on Paris demanding better pay and working conditions

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Farmers use tractors to blockade the A16 highway, near Beauvais some hundred kilometers north of Paris, on January 28, 2024, part of a nationwide campaign of protests called by several

farmers unions on pay, tax and regulations. (Photo by AFP)

Paris, January 30 (RHC)-- French farmers prepare to mount a "siege" on the French capital to pressure the government into meeting their demands on pay, tax, and regulations.

Farmers have used tractors and trucks to block roads and jam traffic across France. They plan to step up their pressure campaign by establishing eight chokepoints along the major arteries to Paris on Monday afternoon. After that, the protesters will move gradually towards Paris.

Farmers also said they intend to blockade the massive Rungis wholesale food market south of the capital.

The farmers are furious at what they say is a squeeze on purchase prices for produce by supermarket and industrial buyers, as well as complex environmental regulations.

Farmers in Europe's largest agriculture producer say the red tape environmental policies are hurting their bottom lines and rendering them unable to compete with less stringent neighbors. The government plans to mobilize 15,000 police and paramilitary gendarmes in response, with the forces told to show "moderation."

"We don't intend to allow government buildings, or tax collection buildings, or grocery stores to be damaged or trucks transporting foreign produce to be stopped. Obviously, that is unacceptable," French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said ahead of the planned siege.

According to Darmanin, President Emmanuel Macron had instructed the security operation to ensure both Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport to the north and Orly to the south remain open, and the Rungis international wholesale food market south of Paris continues to operate. He said Police and gendarmes are ordered to prevent any incursion into Paris itself.

Arnaud Rousseau, leader of one of the main farmers' unions, FNSEA, said on Sunday that his members expect much more from the government. "What we need are decisions that we think are going to change the software," he told farmers as he visited a group blocking the A16 motorway north of Paris.

Also on Sunday, two activists hurled soup at the glass protecting the Mona Lisa painting at the Louvre Museum in a stunt to call attention to the agriculture industry.

On Wednesday, FNSEA presented the government with a comprehensive list of 100 requests. Namely, it demanded an "immediate answer on pay," urgent aid for "sectors worst hit by the crisis" and, in the long term, to put "an end to the overload of regulations."

According to FNSEA spokesman, Yohann Barbe, the demands also revolved around "helping farmers regain their dignity, their ability to earn a living income," he told RMC radio. In particular, French farmers want to be exempted from proposed EU rules reducing the use of pesticides or requiring farmers to set aside part of their arable land to foster biodiversity.

The "siege" comes as the campaigning for the June EU parliamentary elections nears, where the farming sector is expected to be a debatable matter. President Emmanuel Macron's far-right rival, Marine Le Pen, whose National Rally Party is polling strongly, blamed free-trade agreements, imports, and bureaucracy for the farmers' economic frustration. "The worst enemies of farmers are to be found in this government," she said Thursday.

In neighboring Belgium, farmers have stepped up their campaign, blocking a key motorway on Sunday as they too demand better conditions. In recent weeks, similar farmers' protests have also mushroomed in Germany, Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands, with far-right populist politicians trying to capitalize on

the anger to rally against free trade agreements.

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