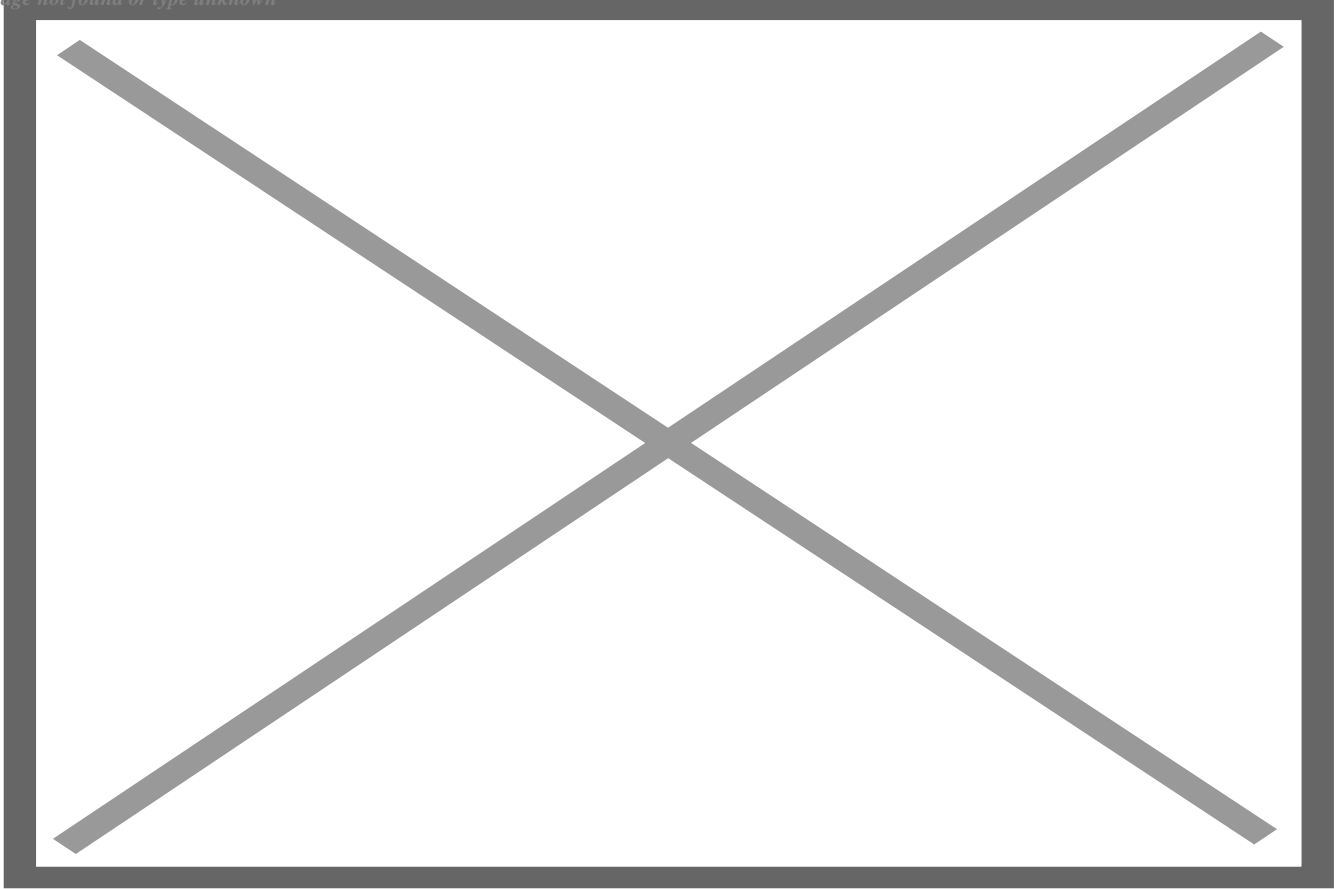


French passengers stranded as railway workers go on strike nationwide

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? France's state-owned railway company has cancelled more than half of its trips this weekend because of a nationwide strike by rail conductors. ?

Paris, December 4 (RHC)-- France's state-owned railway company has cancelled more than half of its trips this weekend because of a nationwide strike by rail conductors. The French train operator SNCF imposed the drastic service cutbacks as nearly 10,000 conductors went on strike Saturday demanding better work conditions.

"It is a strike that we did not see coming, neither we nor the unions," said CEO of the SNCF Jean-Pierre Farandou told Swissinfo on Thursday. The three-day strikes are expected to last until Sunday evening.

The cancellations have severely affected rail traffic between France and Switzerland, as only one out of every three trains was seen running. Trains to Switzerland and Italy were cut by two-thirds, trains to Germany were cut by half, while all trains to Spain were canceled, SCNF said. "I don't think it's right to put all French people through this," a traveler said at Paris' Gare de Lyon train station.

According to union leaders, the walk-outs are meant to draw more attention to rules requiring that members work three weekends per month and sleep away from home for more than 10 nights per month. The conductors' union had two meetings with management without progress before the strike. Other unions joined in support, filing strike notice for both the Christmas and New Year's weekends to put pressure on the SNCF.

Meanwhile, the SNCF management said it would hold "new meetings" with trade unions and workers next week.

Over the past three months, French major trade unions have staged several mass demonstrations in Paris and hundreds of other locations across France to call for higher salaries amid soaring cost of living.

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