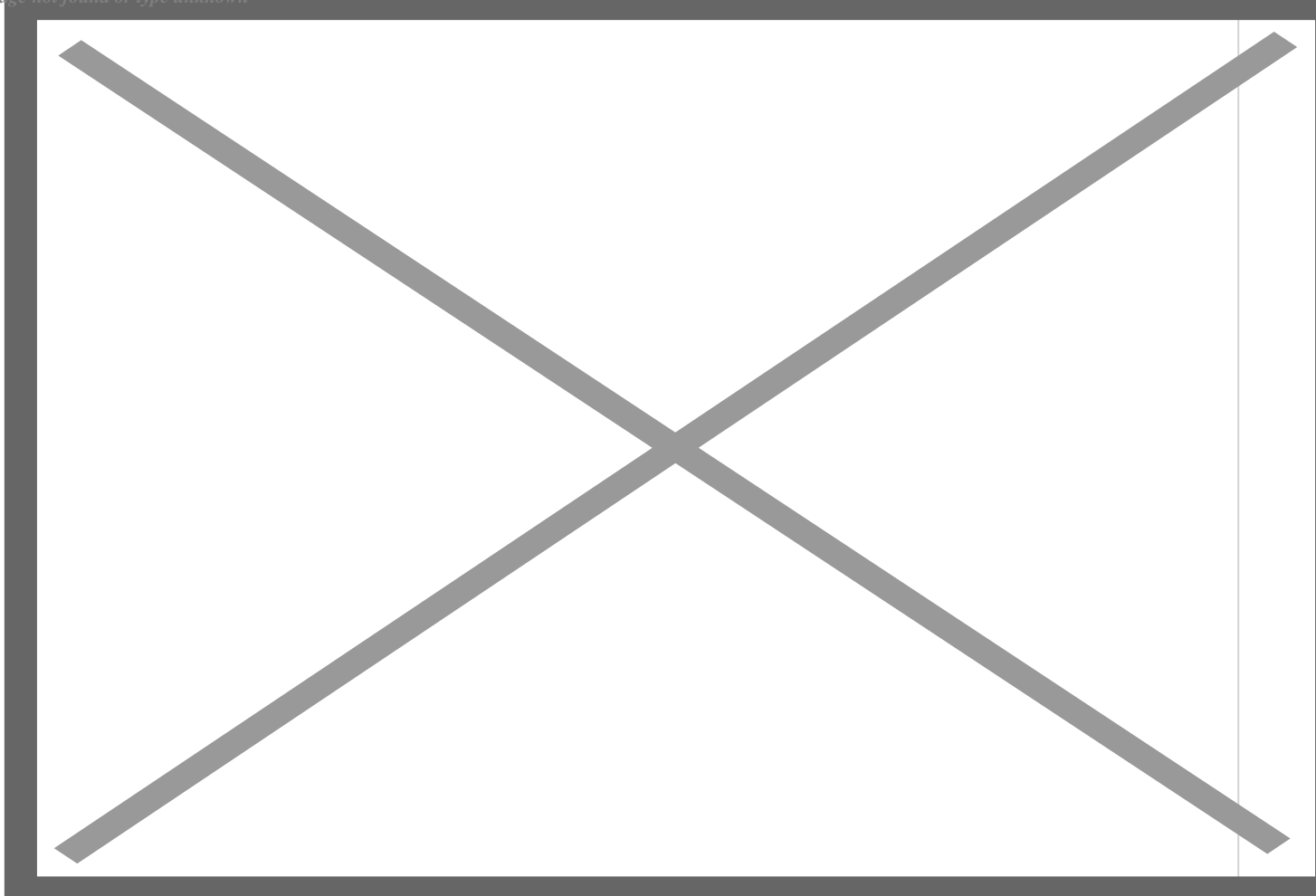


Police clash with pension demonstrators for second night in Paris

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A protester shoots fireworks at police officers, with the Eiffel tower seen in the background, during a demonstration on Place de la Concorde in Paris [Julien De Rosa/AFP]

Paris, March 18 (RHC)-- Riot police clashed with protesters for a second night in Paris as demonstrations continued against the government's plans to raise the French pension age. The growing unrest since the start of the year, which has resulted in a wave of strikes and rubbish piling up on the streets of the French capital, has left President Emmanuel Macron with the gravest challenge to his authority since the so-called "Gilets Jaunes" or "Yellow Vest" protests of December 2018.

Police fired tear gas on Friday night to deal with crowd disorder as protesters gathered in the Place de la Concorde, near the Assemblée Nationale parliament building. "Macron, Resign!" chanted some demonstrators, as they squared up to a line of riot police.

The protest at Paris's elegant Place de Concorde started with a festive spirit as several thousand demonstrators chanted, danced and lit a huge bonfire. But it soon degenerated into a scene echoing Thursday night as riot police charged and used tear gas to empty the square while some protesters lobbed fireworks and threw paving stones at police. On Thursday night, police also baton-charged the crowds and used water cannons while small groups, then set street fires in chic neighbourhoods nearby.

French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin told radio station RTL that 310 people were arrested overnight, most of them in Paris. Scattered protests were also held in cities around France – from a march in Bordeaux to a rally in Toulouse.

Port officers in Calais temporarily stopped ferries from crossing the English Channel to Dover. Some university campuses in Paris were blocked and protesters occupied a high-traffic ring road around the French capital.

Paris rubbish collectors have extended their strike for a 12th day, with piles of foul-smelling rubbish growing in the streets. Striking sanitation workers also continued to block Europe's largest incineration site and two other sites that treat rubbish from the capital.

Some yellow vest activists, who mounted formidable protests against Macron's economic policies during his first term, were among those who relayed Friday's Paris protest on social media. Police say that "radicalised yellow vests" are among troublemakers at protest marches.

The French are deeply attached to keeping the official retirement age at 62, which is among the lowest in OECD countries. Macron's administration used a special constitutional power to push through the pension reforms which will, among other things, gradually increase the retirement age from 62 to 64.

More than eight out of 10 French people are unhappy with the government's decision to skip the vote in parliament on changing the retirement age and 65 percent want strikes and protests to continue, a Toluna Harris Interactive poll for RTL radio showed.

Trade unions organising the opposition to the reforms have urged demonstrators to remain peaceful during more strikes and marches in the days ahead. They have also called on people to leave schools, factories, refineries and other workplaces to force Macron to abandon his plan to make the French work two more years, until 64, before receiving a full pension.

Left-wing and centrist opposition legislators filed a motion of no-confidence in parliament on Friday afternoon. But even though Macron lost his absolute majority in France's lower house in elections last year, there was little chance this would go through – unless a surprise alliance of legislators from all sides is formed. Going ahead without a vote "is a denial of democracy ... a total denial of what has been happening in the streets for several weeks", 52-year-old psychologist Nathalie Alquier said in Paris.

Protests are planned for this weekend and a new day of nationwide industrial action is scheduled for next Thursday. Teachers' unions called for strikes next week, which could disrupt the emblematic Baccalaureate high-school exams.

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