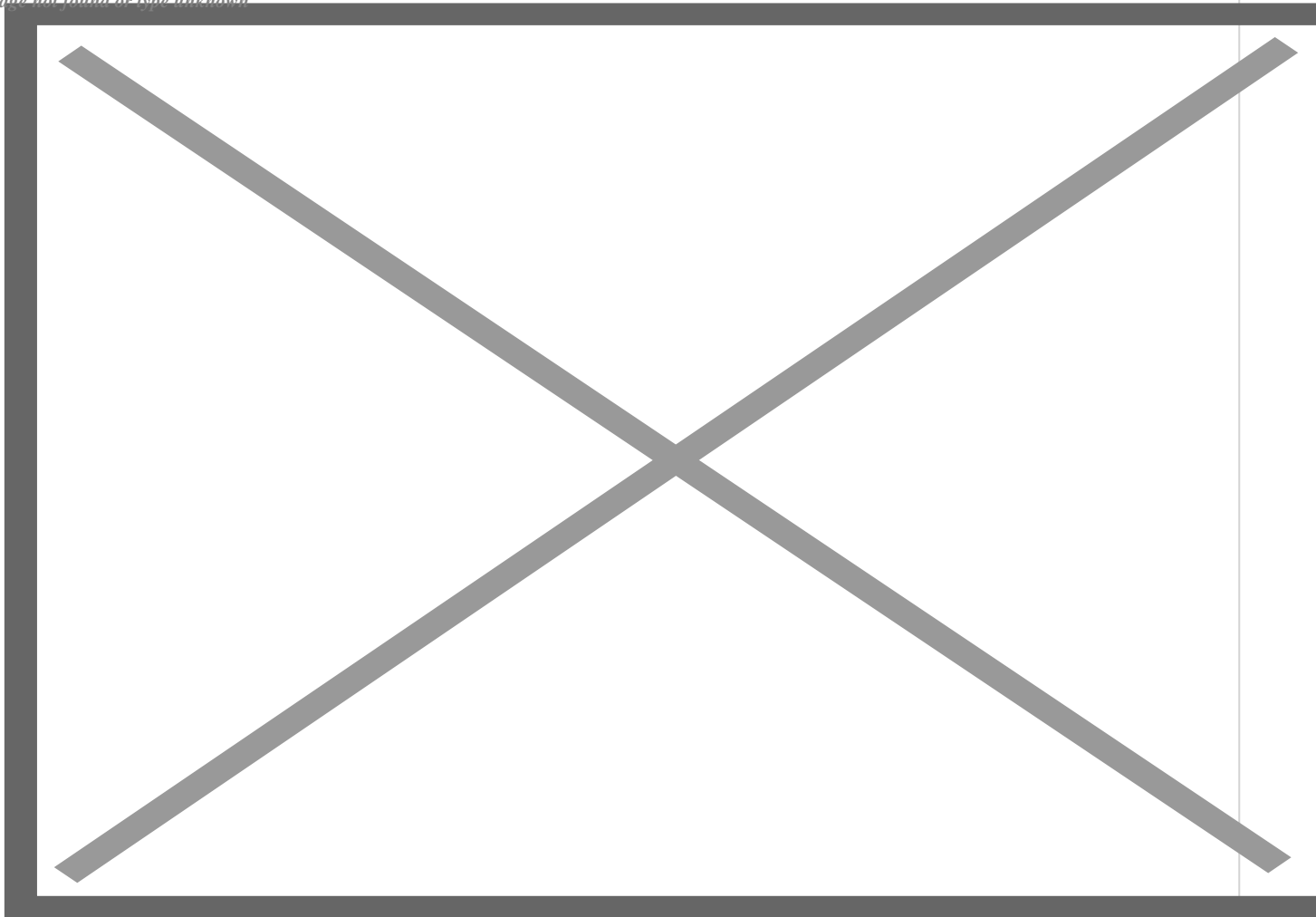


Protests held in France amid anger at Macron's pension reform

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People protest in Nantes, France [Stephane Mahe/Reuters]

Paris, March 18 (RHC)-- Refinery strikes have been held across France, and more demonstrations are taking place throughout the country due to widespread anger at the government for raising the state

pension age without a parliamentary vote.

The growing unrest, combined with rubbish piling up on the streets of Paris after refuse workers joined in the action, has left President Emmanuel Macron with the gravest challenge to his authority since the so-called “Gilets Jaunes”, or Yellow Vests protests, which began in late 2018.

Thirty-seven percent of operational staff at TotalEnergies’ refineries and depots – at sites, including Feyzin in southeast France and Normandy in the north – were on strike on Saturday, a company spokesperson said. Rolling strikes continued on the railways.

Riot police clashed with protesters on Friday evening in Paris as a demonstration took place at the Place de la Concorde near the National Assembly building. Sixty-one people were arrested. This led the Paris prefecture to ban rallies on the Place de la Concorde and the nearby Champs-Élysées. Police said they were doing so “due to serious risks of disturbances to public order.” A further rally, however, was expected on Saturday on Place d’Italie in southern Paris.

Elsewhere in the French capital, a group of students and activists from the Permanent Revolution collective briefly invaded the Forum des Halles shopping mall, waving banners calling for a general strike and shouting, “Paris, stand up! Rise up,” videos on social media showed.

People marched in towns and cities around the country after regional unions called for a weekend of protests. BFM television also showed images of demonstrations under way in cities that included Marseille, Compiègne and Nantes.

“There is no place for violence. One must respect parliamentary democracy,” Digital Transition and Telecommunications Minister Jean-Noël Barrot told Sud Radio.

Ariane Laget, 36, was among about 200 people demonstrating in the small southern town of Lodeve. “We’re fed up. We feel like we’re being trampled on and no one is listening,” she told the AFP news agency.

A broad alliance of France’s main unions has said it would continue to mobilise to try to force a U-turn on the pension changes. A day of nationwide industrial action is planned for Thursday.

Eight days of nationwide protests since mid-January and many local industrial actions have so far been largely peaceful, but the unrest over the past three days is reminiscent of the Yellow Vests protests, which erupted over high fuel prices and forced Macron into a partial U-turn on a carbon tax.

Macron’s overhaul raises the pension age by two years to 64, which the government says is essential to ensure the system does not go bust. The government has said the change is necessary to avoid the system slipping into deficit and brings France in line with its European neighbours, where the legal retirement age is typically higher.

But critics say the changes are unfair for people who start working at a young age in physically tough jobs and women who interrupt their careers to raise children.



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