

Fuel deliveries begin in Britain but petrol protests spread throughout Europe

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The blockades of Britain's fuel supply depots by hauliers and farmers protesting high taxation on petrol and diesel began to be scaled back early Thursday morning, in face of a united offensive by the Labour government, the Trades Union Congress and the mass media.

Last night the government announced that the army had been placed on standby under Britain's emergency powers legislation to break the dispute and ensure the movement of fuel. 80 military tankers were deployed to strategic points around the country on Wednesday night. Police were also told to use whatever force was necessary to enable tankers to leave the depots.

The efforts to break the dispute by anti-democratic measures were endorsed that same day by the Trades Union Congress at its conference in Scotland. The TUC condemned the fuel blockades as "an unconstitutional and unlawful attempt to bully the government into submission... a challenge to democracy and a crude attempt to hold the country to ransom". Bill Morris, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union which organises some sections of truckers, instructed his members to cross picket lines set up by the protestors. Other unions called for protesters to be hauled before the courts like striking miners in the 1984-85 dispute.

The media united in calls for the blockades to be ended. Some expressed sympathy for the aim of reducing crippling fuel taxes that are having a devastating impact on working people, the transport industry and farming. Others, particularly nominally liberal newspapers like the *Guardian*, echoed the propaganda of the government and the TUC that the anti-tax protests were a right wing plot against democracy. All urged the protesters to take note of the crisis the blockade had created for the emergency

services and the National Health Service in particular.

Attacks on the demonstrations by the government prompted a flood of supporters to join the pickets, including 200 taxi drivers in Liverpool, who walked two miles to the blockade after police refused to let them through in their cabs. At mass meetings held at the various pickets of fuel depots this morning, a number decided to end their blockades, claiming they had won the "moral high ground," and so as not to risk alienating the presently overwhelming public support for their campaign against the government.

Britain has been badly affected by fuel shortages, particularly the auto industry and those factories dependent on "just-in-time" deliveries to keep production rolling. Hospitals and health services in the capital were said to be "24 hours away from a crisis" as the fuel shortage left patients and doctors stranded. Schools in some areas have also begun to close and there were food shortages in supermarkets due to a combination of failed deliveries and panic buying.

The Stanlow, Cardiff, Avon and Grangemouth blockades have ended, but pickets continue at other depots in Manchester, Jarrow, Pembrokeshire and elsewhere. The Stanlow protesters drafted a letter to the Prime Minister demanding fuel tax cuts within 60 days. The government's measures have provoked other forms of disruption, such as go-slows by lorries on motorways and major city roads. Fully 80 percent of British petrol stations are now without fuel. Some 100 lorry drivers protested in London Wednesday, bringing traffic around the busy Hyde Park Corner interchange to a halt. Police prevented the truckers from driving to Downing Street. A convoy of slow-moving lorries brought traffic chaos to the country's main north-south M1 and A1 motorways. Other main routes and motorways were hit in Yorkshire, Devon and

Warwickshire. In Greater Manchester protesting taxi drivers caused widespread delays on roads serving the area's busy airport.

Scotland also saw a go slow demonstration on the region's main A9 route. Scottish fishermen joined the protest over high fuel prices, with a flotilla of about 40 vessels sailing up the River Clyde to Glasgow, mostly from the Clyde Fishermen's Association. Spokesman Kenneth MacNab said, "We feel that what is happening in the fishing industry is even more important as our fuel prices, over the last 12 months, have more or less doubled."

Protests over high fuel costs continued to hit a number of other European countries. For the fifth day Thursday, Belgian truck drivers blockaded the streets of the capital, Brussels, and other cities such as Nivelles, Mons, Charleroi and Liege. The truckers extended their action on Wednesday, dubbed "operation escargots", to many of the border areas with Germany, Holland and France bringing transit traffic to a halt. Asked how long they intended to keep up the protest, one driver said, "One week, two weeks, three weeks—no problem." Four of the country's main oil depots remain blocked, meaning filling stations could run dry in a matter of days.

In Germany a convoy of over 200 truckers, taxis and busses drove through the centre of Saarbrücken, near the French border, on Tuesday. On Wednesday angry farmers and hauliers took to the streets of the Bavarian capital Munich, protesting outside the party offices of the federal coalition partners—the Social Democratic Party and the Greens. The demonstration was called by the German Farmers Union. They said they intended to "gatecrash" various political meetings around the country being attended by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

In Schwerin, in northern Germany, farmers, truckers and taxi drivers handed over a protest note for Chancellor Schröder. One of the main hauliers organisations announced that it was planning further protests.

Farmers in the eastern state of Saxony are threatening a blockade on Friday. Their main demands are for a lowering of taxes on fuel used in farming, and the reversing of "eco-taxes", set to rise again in January 2001.

As in Britain, the protests against high fuel prices

have won widespread popular support, despite the traffic chaos some of the demonstrations have provoked. In one poll, more than two thirds of those asked declared their support for the actions. Like their British counterparts, the German trade union association DGB has opposed the protests and declared its solidarity with the government's intention to raise petrol taxes.

In Holland, lorry drivers staged wildcat blockades around Amsterdam and Rotterdam, with 60 taxi drivers halting traffic at the country's main airport, Schiphol. Farmers and truckers in Spain, Poland and Ireland are threatening similar actions.

In France, demonstrations were mounted by building workers and other groups that received no concessions in the government's deal last week ending blockades by truckers, farmers and fishermen. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin appealed for a meeting of European transport ministers to find ways of harmonising fuel prices and taxes.

See Also:

British government threatens to use emergency powers against fuel protesters

[13 September 2000]

Fuel protests escalate throughout Europe

[12 September 2000]



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