

Fuel protests escalate throughout Europe

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A wave of protests against high fuel prices is sweeping across Europe. Actions by road hauliers, farmers and others heavily dependent on petrol and diesel in Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Ireland follow six days in which motorways, oil refineries, distribution depots and ports were blockaded in France—forcing concessions over fuel prices on the Socialist party-led coalition government.

In Britain, motorists face shortages of petrol as six out of the country's nine oil refineries and four distribution depots are subject to blockades by lorry drivers and farmers. Hundreds of petrol stations have begun rationing supplies. Protests took place over the weekend at a number of oil depots, including Stanlow, Immingham, Avonmouth and Cardiff. Manchester Fuels Terminal has been closed since Saturday evening. Campaigners blockaded a fuel depot in Pembroke, Wales and closed the UK's largest inland oil terminal at Kingsbury in the West Midlands. There was some violence at refineries in Wales and the North West, leading to arrests. In Scotland lorry drivers staged a go-slow on main roads in Edinburgh. About 100 tractors and wagons blockaded lanes on the A1 in Northumbria and the A55 in north Wales. In Liverpool taxi drivers have joined the protest and a demonstration Monday brought the city centre to a halt.

In Belgium, 2,500 truckers, taxi drivers and tour bus operators staged a protest on Sunday in Brussels. About 100 lorry drivers are still blocking the city centre and the country's main refinery at Feluy in the south. They have suffered a 50 percent rise in the cost of diesel since the beginning of 1999.

In Germany, lorry drivers and farmers ignored laws against unauthorised strike action, blocking traffic in two towns at the weekend and threatening to obstruct motorways. In the northern city of Hildesheim, more than 100 truckers stopped traffic, carrying banners reading, "Nowhere are drivers fleeced like in Germany."

In Ireland, road hauliers are planning two days of protest at the end of next week.

In Italy, a refinery in Sicily is being blockaded and a lorry drivers' strike has been threatened. Transport companies, farmers, fishermen and other groups are to stage a joint day

of action on Friday. Fishermen's unions have threatened a port blockade from September 17 and the transport minister has invited truckers to discuss fuel prices. The government has already promised to extend a temporary tax break on petrol.

Spanish consumer groups have called for a boycott of the country's main oil company Repsol.

The actions in Europe were spurred on by the successful protests of sections of small businesses and workers in France against the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. At the beginning of September, Jospin awarded fuel tax concessions in response to a fishermen's blockade that ended on August 31, which had cut off the port of Calais and also hit Boulogne, Dunkirk, Le Havre, St Malo, and Cherbourg. This encouraged similar actions by French hauliers, coach companies, farmers, taxi-drivers and ambulance men. Barricades around 125 oil refineries meant that 80 percent of the country's petrol stations ran dry, bringing France to a standstill and closing several airports.

On Saturday the protests were ended after agricultural workers were awarded a £45 million tax concession and hauliers accepted a subsidy of £1,000 per lorry for this year, with more tax breaks to come. Taxi drivers were offered a fare increase of 4.5 percent beginning on October 1.

The situation became so grave that the government considered using police and troops to force the removal of blockades, but massive public sympathy for the action, estimated at 88 percent in favour, made such an option all but impossible. A Jospin aide told the press, "If we can avoid a direct confrontation like that we will. One knows how that kind of thing begins. One doesn't know how it ends."

One reason for the rise in fuel prices is the escalating cost of crude oil, which has reached a 10-year high—fluctuating between \$31-34.50 a barrel. Just under two years ago a barrel of crude fetched just \$9.90. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has been under pressure from the West to increase production and get prices down to \$28 a barrel. On Sunday it agreed to a minimal three percent production increase, which analysts say will have little effect.

The rise in crude oil prices is only the last straw, however. The camel's back has been broken by ever rising levels of government taxation on fuel. By far the worst case is in Britain, where petrol costs are the highest in Europe. Prices rose by more than 40 percent from January 1999 to June 2000. Tax and duties make up around 75 percent of the price of petrol and diesel at the pump, depending on the grade of fuel. The average price of a litre of premium unleaded petrol stands at 85p and 90p in London (\$1.25 and \$1.32). Americans pay around \$2 a gallon (55c a litre). Fuel taxes raise £23-25bn (\$32.5-35.4bn) a year for the UK government.

The level of taxation on fuel across Europe is less extreme, but the general picture remains the same. In Germany, for example, the government has raised fuel taxes twice since April 1999. Another increase is due next January.

Fuel tax rises are routinely justified by invoking concern for the environment and a desire to cut emissions, but this is just window-dressing. The rise is part of a broader shift by Europe's mainly social democratic governments away from direct and progressive taxation on income and wealth—through cutting taxes on business and high earners—towards indirect taxation on the sale of goods and services. This move has been welcomed by big business as it shifts the tax burden onto the backs of working people, but in the case of fuel it threatens sections of industry and the haulage industry in particular with bankruptcy.

Jospin has been forced to offer subsidies and targeted concessions to aid these sections, but the price he has paid is a heavy one. Officials estimate the financial cost of ending the dispute at £460 million. More serious still, Jospin's retreat in the face of mass protests threatens to reawaken a fighting spirit amongst workers throughout Europe.

Howls of anger directed against both the demonstrators and Jospin's efforts to appease them were heard the length and breadth of the Continent. In France, the nominally left-leaning *Libération* newspaper complained, "In a country which bumbles on endlessly about the rule of law, it is staggering to see how a fraction of the population can impose a situation where it seizes public space with complete illegality, complete impudence and complete impunity." It demanded that Jospin be, "ready to use force if necessary".

Speaking for the Blair government, Scottish Secretary John Reid said that Britain would not experience mass disruption because "the people of this country do not resort to the French way of doing things". Conservative shadow chancellor Francis Maude said of the French government, "They are just appeasing law-breakers". The British press tried to whip up anti-French sentiment over the plight of holidaymakers caught in the blockades, all the time

contrasting the "anarchic" Gaul with the "law-abiding" Briton. The *Telegraph* pontificated that, "This erosion of the rule of law [in France/Europe] is very rarely cited as an argument against European integration. But this is the strongest objection of all."

As fuel protests spread to Britain and elsewhere, however, such right wing denunciations of France's supposedly "anti-democratic" traditions began to wear thin. The media was forced to acknowledge that Britain and other countries had also witnessed mass social protests—and not so very long ago. The *Observer* warned in its headline, "welcome back to the 1970s". Newspapers across Europe also raised their fears of clashes between workers and governments on a range of issues.

Since they came to office, the social democrats—such as the Blair government in Britain, Schroeder in Germany and their co-thinkers in other European countries—have been able to push through draconian attacks on living standards without meeting serious levels of opposition from the working class. Having brought these governments to power as an alternative to reviled outgoing Conservative regimes, workers were ill prepared for what followed—the imposition of policies normally associated with the political right.

The past years have seen a growing disaffection amongst working people towards their traditional parties that has up to now taken the form of a general turn away from politics. In this respect, the extraordinary level of popular support for militant action by the hauliers and others has serious implications for Europe's governments. Groups representing sectional business interests presently lead the ongoing fuel protests. Moreover, working people will not benefit from the type of concessions agreed in France. Nevertheless the ruling elite has drawn little comfort from reading this. They know that the message sent out by the French events has undermined all claims that social and political opposition to the divisive economic policies of the social democrats is both futile and a thing of the past. What makes things worse, as far as they are concerned, is that France also provides an object lesson in how a struggle in one country can quickly spread throughout the entire Continent.



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