

General strike in France as workers continue protests against Raffarin government

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On March 10, tens of thousands of workers throughout France joined a national strike to oppose plans by the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to extend working hours beyond the current 35-hour week and to undermine social welfare benefits, including health care and pension rights.

The strike paralysed the country, disrupting transport and services in 55 towns and cities nationwide. Organisers say that nearly one million people participated in demonstrations across the country—150,000 in Paris and 800,000 elsewhere.

The action was the latest in a series of national protests. On February 5, some 500,000 people demonstrated across France, and workers and students held industrial action and protests earlier this week in the run-up to the general strike.

On March 8, between 165,000 to 200,000 students held nationwide demonstrations to protest reforms to the curriculum at universities and secondary schools. In Paris police used tear gas against students in an attempt to disperse the protest.

On February 9, the National Assembly, the lower parliamentary chamber, legislated to allow private-sector employees to exchange time off work for more money, thus making large inroads into the 35-hour week law introduced under the previous Socialist Party government. The French Senate approved the new measures on March 4.

Yesterday's general strike was called by the main trade unions covering private and public sector workers, including all the major transport unions.

In Paris, commuter trains and subway workers were involved in 48 hours of industrial action. According to estimates, 80 percent of suburban lines were suspended and 75 percent of services run by the metro operator RATP were halted due to the action. A number of lines did not run at all. Bus services in the capital were running

at a rate of just three out of four and many services were forced to reroute due to street protests being held during the day.

In the city of Nice in southern France, no bus services ran whatsoever.

Air traffic at Orly airport, south of Paris, was heavily hit, with an estimated 75 percent of flights canceled. The main Paris airport, Charles de Gaulle, was functioning at 75 percent capacity, with 38 arrivals and 40 departures per hour. Delays reportedly averaged around 45 minutes.

Train services were also severely disrupted. Railway workers began a 36-hour stoppage starting at 8 pm on Wednesday March 9. The TGV high-speed trains service only ran approximately 50 percent of services, whilst the regional train operator RER reported that only between 15 percent and 25 percent of the service had run as normal.

The Eurostar train service linking Paris to London, Amsterdam and Brussels was also affected, with about 10 percent of its scheduled services hit by the strike.

Cross-Channel ferry services were halted, affecting passengers and freight companies as the port of Calais closed for 24 hours until 10 pm Thursday evening. The UK ferry company P&O announced that it had suspended most of its services. The Freight Transport Association (FTA) said the 24-hour strike would cost freight companies about £1 million.

Staff at public hospitals participated in the protests, agreeing to handle only emergency cases during the strike, and industrial action took place in many schools, with almost half of education staff participating.

According to the unions, electricity workers had implemented cuts in power production and the national postal service said that 15 percent of staff had supported the stoppage.

Strikes also took place in national and local government departments, banks, the press, museums and tourist offices.

The general strike coincided with a visit to Paris by the 12-member International Olympic Committee to assess the French bid for the 2012 Olympic Games.

The trade unions had insisted that the general strike was unrelated to the visit, and ensured that the IOC visit would not be disrupted. On this basis the unions co-coordinated the protests with the Paris Olympic bid officials and the police department.

The unions also organized the distribution of 10,000 T-shirts and caps sporting the Paris 2012 logo to those attending the demonstrations. Francois Chereque, the CFDT trade union leader, assured the IOC, “We will do all we can to prevent any disruptions. For the Games, the CFDT’s watchword will be: ‘Let’s put conflicts to one side!’”

The struggle by workers to defend their employment rights and the welfare system has widespread public support. According to an opinion poll conducted by the CSA company for the *L’Humanite* newspaper on March 2 and 3, 69 percent of the French public supports the strikes.

The support is indicative of growing discontent with the Raffarin government. Jean-Daniel Levy, director of studies at CSA, said of the survey, “People aren’t happy with the redistribution of the fruits of growth. They see that things are going well for companies and at the same time, their wages aren’t rising.”

French Labour and Social Affairs Minister Jean-Louis Borloo said this week that he hoped the trade unions would support the government’s “reforms of adaptation”, stating that “The trade unions are opponents without being enemies.”

On March 9, Borloo announced that negotiations over wages are to be held for workers in several industries, and called on trade unions to participate.

In January unemployment in France increased to 10 percent (2.6 million adults), a five-year high. According to figures from the Labour Ministry, just 39,000 jobs were created last year. It is forecast that growth in the French economy is set to fall sharply.



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