



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on October 18, 2010

Fuel Supplies Low as France Engulfed in Protests, Strikes

France is running low on fuel supplies as nationwide strikes led by labor unions paralyze roads, fuel refineries, public transportation, and more. And the protests are expected to intensify.

Most of France's refineries have already been shut down by strikes. No crude can arrive due to strikes at important French ports. And protests over the weekend — with crowd estimates ranging from 800,000 to several million — struck over 200 French cities.

One of France's largest newspapers said close to 1,000 gasoline stations were having trouble with supplies, but the government only acknowledged less than 250 of those. The cause, according to ministers, is panic buying among citizens, not actual shortages.

But [news reports](#) also warned of impending jet fuel shortages at Charles De Gaulle, Paris' main international airport. Government spokesmen said a pipeline to the airport that had been shut by strikes was open again. But reports are conflicting, and unions are complaining that untrained executives reopened the pipeline and caused a security risk. The Nice airport is already low on fuel and could run out soon, though the government said plans were being made to supply it from Italy.

"We will unblock the depots if necessary if they are unable to operate due to external factors," [said](#) French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux. "At this point in time there's no risk of a shortage."

Hortefeux also said the government still has reserve stockpiles and that he would order police to dismantle any strikers' barricades at fuel depots to prevent the anger from "suffocating" the economy. Other French ministers have offered similar pledges.

Truckers, organized by union bosses, have been blocking highways in some areas of the country. Public transportation in many regions has already been affected. And labor leaders are hoping to bring the transportation sector to a standstill until their demands are met.

Even cash delivery drivers are considering a strike, according to the U.K. [Telegraph](#). That means ATM machines and banks could soon run out of cash.

The anger is mainly directed at President Nicolas Sarkozy's austerity package. The lower house of the national legislature already passed a bill that would raise the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62. The full-pension age would move from 65 to 67 under the plan, which would also increase the number of years worked necessary for state pension eligibility. The Senate will take up the measure on October 19. So strikers and protestors plan more disruptions for early in the week.

"Raising the retirement age is the key to the financing of the system," Prime Minister Francois Fillon [said](#) in a TV interview over the weekend. "The debate and vote in the Senate will go ahead." He called





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the efforts to blockade fuel depots an “illegal action” and said the pension reforms must go forward.

Other government ministers have also backed the plan, including Labor Minister Eric Woerth. “It’s a necessary and unavoidable reform because we can’t have a pension system in deficit,” he [told](#) iTele television. “We live longer so it’s natural that we have to work longer. We just have to keep calmly explaining it.”

French protests have historically been very successful at strong-arming the government. Sometimes farmers use tractors and produce to blockade roads, and students and labor unions regularly paralyze national transportation systems. But the outcome of this showdown remains uncertain.

“The government does not want to budge, but there could end up being a gulf between what it wants and what it has to do,” explained University of Grenoble political scientist Pierre Bréchon in an interview with the U.K. [Guardian](#). “It is not possible to predict who will be the winner in a conflict like this. We will only know that once it is over.”

Protests and strikes have also affected other parts of the European Union, though not as badly as in France and Greece. But analysts are predicting that European resentment against so-called “austerity measures” — tax hikes and spending cuts — will continue to rise, especially after governments bailed out big banks and other profligate regimes. Some analysts have actually suggested that the chaos is being orchestrated to further integrate European countries under Brussels’ authority.

“The ‘alternative Internet news’ approach is that the crisis has been cynically fomented to create a greater European Union. This has been our argument as well,” explained an analysis by the free-market oriented [Daily Bell](#). “But in our view, the elite has been caught by surprise by the truth-telling of the Internet and by the depth of monetary unraveling. This is having all sorts of unintended ramifications and is upsetting elite plans. The EU promotion is beginning to fail.”

Photo: A demonstrator holds a banner reading: “Strike until victory” during a demonstration in Bordeaux, southwestern France, Oct.16, 2010: AP

Images



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