

## **Traffic jams cripple Paris as pension strikes halt trains**

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French President Emmanuel Macron girded for one of the toughest weeks of his presidency as his government prepares to present a redesign of the convoluted French pension system.

***Commuters wait for a tramway in Paris, Monday, Dec.9, 2019. Paris commuters inched to work Monday through exceptional traffic jams, as strikes to preserve retirement rights halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day. (AP Photo/Rafael Yaghobzadeh)***

**Paris:** Paris commuters inched to work Monday through massive traffic jams as strikes against retirement plan changes halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day.

French President Emmanuel Macron girded for one of the toughest weeks of his presidency as his government prepares to present a redesign of the convoluted French pension system.

He sees melding 42 different retirement plans into one as delivering a more equitable, financially sustainable system.

Unions see the move as an attack on the French way of life even though Macron's government is not expected to change the current retirement age of 62.

Citing safety risks, the SNCF national rail network warned travelers to stay home or use an alternative means of locomotion to get around Monday instead of thronging platforms in hopes of getting the few available trains running.

***Empty rail tracks at the Gare St-Charles station in Marseille, southern France, Monday, Dec. 9, 2019. Paris commuters inched to work Monday through exceptional traffic jams, as strikes to preserve retirement rights halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day. (AP Photo/Daniel Cole)***

As a result, the national road authority reported more than 600 kilometers (360 miles) of traffic problems at morning rush hour around the Paris region up from 150 kilometers (90 miles) on an average day.

The road traffic was worse Monday than when the strike started last week, because many French employees managed to work from home or take a day off then. But that's increasingly difficult as the strike wears on.

Gabriella Micuci from the Paris suburb of Le Bourget walked several kilometers (miles) in cold rain and then squeezed into a packed subway on one of the two automated Metro lines that don't need drivers. Other commuters used shared bikes or electric scooters.

"I left home earlier than usual, I thought I was going to be able to catch an early train but not at all," Micuci told The Associated Press.

"It's a real catastrophe, people are becoming even more violent, they are pushing you."

***Commuters enter a subway station in Paris, Monday, Dec.9, 2019. Paris commuters inched to work Monday through exceptional traffic jams, as strikes to preserve retirement rights halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day. (AP Photo/Rafael Yaghobzadeh)***

Fortified by the biggest nationwide demonstrations in years when the strike launched last Thursday, unions plan new protests on Tuesday and hope to keep up the pressure on Macron's government to back down on the retirement reform.

Only about a sixth of French trains were running Monday and international train lines also saw disruptions. Union activists also blocked bus depots around Paris, limiting bus routes.

Macron summoned Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and other top officials Sunday night to strategise for a crucial week.

The prime minister will present details of the government's plan on Wednesday, which is expected to encourage people to work longer.

Currently some French workers can retire in their 50s.

The reform is central to Macron's vision of transforming the French economy. Government ministers insist the current system is unfair and financially unsustainable, while unions say the reform undercuts worker rights and will force people to work longer for less.

Seeking to head off public anger, Macron asked veteran politician Jean-Paul Delevoye to hold months of meetings with workers, employers and others to come up with recommendations for France's new retirement plan.

Delevoye is presenting his conclusions to unions on Monday.

- AP