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Al Jazeera

French transport slowed by strike

Transport workers strike against plans to raise the retirement age, with millions set to protest later on Tuesday.

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French workers are staging a one-day strike against the government's plans to raise the retirement age, in what is the fourth major action against the reforms in a month.

Rail, sea port and flight workers went on strike across the country on Tuesday, while the Paris metro was slowed to a minimum.

Up to half the flights at Orly Airport and a third of flights from Charles de Gaulle-Roissy in Paris are expected to be cancelled, although airlines had already re-booked many passengers ahead of the strike.

The action, which comes a day after the French senate voted to raised the country's official minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, is threatening to turn into a showdown between the unions and Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president.

This time, the unions have threatened to stretch Tuesday's strikes past the usual 24-hours.

High turnout expected

The unions have called nationwide protest marches later in the day, and say they are expecting millions of people to turnout.

Three prior protests have attracted crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands but have not halted Sarkozy's pension reform plan.

"The government is taking the risk of a radicalisation of the movement," Francois Chereque, head of the powerful CFDT union, said. "There will be a very big turnout today."

Sarkozy faces re-election in 2012, and his opinion poll ratings are at all-time lows. David Assouline, an opposition leader, accused Sarkozy of trying to provoke a "showdown" and bring unions "to their knees".

Monday vote, which came in at a narrow 174 to 159, shut the door on the most controversial aspect of the reform package, which Sarkozy's administration hopes to pass by the end of the month.

The senate also voted to raise the minimum age to receive a full state pension from 65 to 67.

Strike will halt train and air transportation

While two-thirds of the high-speed TGV trains were expected to be cancelled, those running between Paris and London are set to operate normally.

The oil industry and education workers have also joined in the strike.

Employees at France's biggest oil port, Fos-Lavera, have now halted work for 15 straight days, and the education ministry predicted that more than a fourth of the country's elementary and pre-kindergarten teachers would strike on Tuesday.

One poll of around 1,000 people published in the newspaper *Le Parisien* found that 69 per cent of the respondents supported the new strike, while 61 per cent supported a "continuous and lasting" one.

Like other European governments looking at austerity measures, France faces a yawning deficit and a need to improve its finances if it hopes to retain a AAA credit rating, enabling the country to borrow money at a lower interest rate.

The reform bill has already been approved in its entirety by the lower house of France's parliament, the National Assembly. The senate is now voting on it piece by piece.