



FRENCH PROTESTERS DISRUPT AIRPORT; GAS SHORTAGES EASE

News / Airports / Routes



Union activists disrupted the Marseille airport Friday and halted activity at half of the country's oil refineries in protests over changes to France's labor system, but nationwide gasoline shortages eased slightly after government intervention.

Tensions let up slightly Friday after one-day strikes and protests Thursday pitting unions against the Socialist government and leaving many drivers in the lurch. The heart of their dispute is a labor bill that would loosen rules on France's 35-hour work week and make it easier for employers to hire — and fire.

Some unions continued the strike into Friday, and France's main oil company Total said four of its eight refineries were at a standstill. French media reported that the oil terminal in Le Havre on the English Channel also remained shut by strikes.

But pressure on gas stations eased, with fewer lines visible at stations in the Paris region. Earlier in the week 30 percent of stations were out of gas or running low, notably amid panic buying, but Total and the UFIP national oil industry lobby reported improvements Friday.

The CGT union, which has been leading the protests, focused its attention Friday on a trial of Air France union members accused of tearing the shirts off airline executives in a violent protest last year.

The judge in the trial in Bobigny outside Paris postponed the proceedings until September, amid fears that it could enflame tensions.

"It's the beginning of a revolution. This is about the future of our country," defendant Sri Colbert told The Associated Press.

Union activists rallied outside the courthouse. Across the country, others briefly blocked entrances to the Marseille airport in solidarity with the Air France workers on trial, according to Marseille CGT member Maxime Picard.

The shirt-ripping incident last October, caught on camera and viewed worldwide, came to epitomize antagonism in French labor relations. It occurred after a meeting where the executives announced further job cuts after years of belt-tightening at the airline.

Air France lawyers decried the delay of the trial, arguing that the exceptional violence should be punished as soon as possible, and not be linked to the larger protest movement.

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