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Commuters waiting to board a subway car at the Gare de l'Est railway station in Paris on Monday. (Remy de la Mauviniere/AP)

## With transit still crippled, French get testy

By Doreen Carvajal

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**PARIS:** With a paralyzing transit strike stretching toward its seventh day, Ludovic Boltz, a commuter, stood in the gloom on a suburban train platform Monday, fuming about his daily journey and shaking a bag of baguettes in fury.

"My opinion of this strike is that it's annoying lots of people and lots of workers," he said, voice rising above a bellowing announcement of another train delay. "It amounts to terrorism and we're the hostages."

But there was no relief in sight to ease the commuter misery from the national transport strike that rail officials estimated has cost the nation almost €100 million, or \$146 million. On Monday, rail workers voted to press on with the strike, most likely at least through Wednesday when union officials will sit down with government officials and transportation executives for talks.

A seventh day of the strike, which affects Paris subway and bus service as well as the national train network, will coincide with a mass walkout Tuesday by civil servants demanding pay increases and protesting job cuts. Air France employees have issued a strike threat, and printing and distribution of newspapers was also expected to be disrupted.

November, in general, is shaping up as the high season in France for strikes, with students challenging a new higher education law, tobacco shop owners organizing to demonstrate against a new anti-smoking law and French judges and lawyers poised for a Nov. 29 strike to protest structural changes that could result in the elimination of 200 courts.

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Along the train platforms, weary resignation with limited services is starting to turn into resentment as the crippling strike continues. On Sunday, several groups organized a counter demonstration in eastern Paris to demand an end to the conflict. The governing party, the UMP, has been passing out fliers at train stations denouncing rail workers as a "minority defending a system of retirement at two speeds."

"People are really fed up," said Sabine Herold, a

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www.monocle.com spokeswoman for a group called Liberal Alternative, which helped organize the stop-the-strike rally in Paris. "It's very complicated with the subway, buses and trains blocked. It's very difficult to have a normal life. People are really fed up because they think the strikers are egotistical."

The rail unions are fighting to keep special privileges for about 500,000 workers that grant locomotive drivers, for example, the option of retiring at 50 or 55 with full pension benefits. The government wants the workers to pay into the retirement system for at least 40 years, changes that have already taken place for workers in private industry and the civil service.

On Sunday, the stop-the-strike demonstration drew about 8,000 people, according to the police, or 20,000, according to organizers, who noted that people had braved bitter cold to participate, along with a general lack of transportation. It was hardly the turnout of May 1968 when a huge showing of the "silent majority" converged on the Champs-Élysées to demonstrate support for then President Charles de Gaulle who was confronting student unrest.

But Herold said the group had united with others to organize another rally for next Sunday if the strikes continue. Others in her group, like Jean-Paul Oury, said they considered the counterdemonstration over the weekend just the first round.

Polls show that the counterdemonstrators are tapping into popular sentiment, with a majority of the French people siding with President Nicolas Sarkozy on pension reform. A weekend poll by Ipsos that was commissioned by the government found that support for changing the pension system had grown 10 percentage points to 64 percent in one week, while support for the strikers had dropped from 35 percent to 33 percent.

In the meantime, French commuters are turning to classic coping techniques: bicycling, roller-skating, carpooling and telecommuting. Some small businesses are changing work hours so that employees come in earlier to leave before the gridlock begins.

Meeting the French, a two-year-old agency that specializes in personal tours of workshops from bakers to butchers, has been forced to face a cold reality as the strike drags on. Too many of the artisans were rearranging work shifts, while tourists could not find transportation to the workshops.

The immediate result, according to Laurence Monclard, the founder of the agency, is that many tours have been cancelled. For now it's too much of a challenge to meet the French except on crowded train platforms.

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