

In protest of pension changes, Mexican teachers prevent cars from crossing across San Diego border

by Sandra Dibble and Anna Cearley

SAN DIEGO - Baja California schoolteachers protesting changes to Mexico's pension system shut down northbound traffic Wednesday at the world's busiest border crossing, the San Ysidro port of entry, for nearly three hours.

Southbound traffic was blocked for close to two hours. The line of cars waiting to enter Mexico stretched as long as a mile from the border on Interstate 5, said Officer Larry Landeros of the California Highway Patrol.

BORDERPROTEST - Pablo Hernandez (in white T-shirt) and Ismael Burgeuno Ruiz (right) joined thousands of fellow teachers from Baja California to block southbound traffic at the San Ysidro port of entry. Photo by Howard Lipin.

The port of entry itself remained open, and pedestrian traffic continued to flow. Vehicle gates were shut for security reasons, but they opened for any vehicle that could make it past the teachers' blockade.

Protest leaders said that from 15,000 to 20,000 protesters from across Baja California joined the march, which wound through Tijuana streets in the morning. Around 12:30 p.m., the marchers arrived south of the San Ysidro port of entry. Tijuana police estimated their numbers at close to 12,000.

The demonstrators said they wanted the international community to know about their opposition to a Mexican law that affects the pensions of teachers and other public-sector workers. President Felipe Calderon pushed hard for the changes that include the establishment of private retirement accounts.

"This law is anti-constitutional," said demonstrator Francisco Javier Miranda Chavez, as other teachers and supporters gathered around the port of entry and prevented vehicles from heading south.

Since passage of the law March 31, teachers have been staging protests across Mexico.

BORDERPROTEST - The northbound road leading to the San Ysidro port of entry is empty. Tijuana officials diverted traffic to the Otay port of entry before protesting teachers arrived to protest a Mexican government law that affects the federal employee pension program that they're not happy with. Photo by Howard Lipin.

Guillermo Estrada, an elementary school teacher in Tijuana, said Wednesday the law means educators will have to work longer before they can receive retirement benefits that were previously guaranteed after 30 years of service.

Tijuana police, hoping to avoid confrontations between protesters and commuters, began diverting northbound drivers to the Otay Mesa crossing shortly before noon. Many southbound drivers also opted to use Otay Mesa.

Just after noon, all 24 lanes leading into San Ysidro had been cleared of traffic, and an unusual silence settled over the border until demonstrators arrived.

After several hours of waiting for the rally to end, some cross-border commuters heading to San Ysidro dozed in their cars behind police lines. Corina Rodriguez of San Ysidro said she wasn't going to try crossing at Otay Mesa.

"Someone told me he had just come back from there and it was impossible," she said. "All the demonstrations are for something, but the way they are doing it isn't right, because it affects a lot of people."

The northbound lanes, shut down about 12:15 p.m., reopened shortly after 3 p.m., said Vince Bond, spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The southbound lanes into Mexico were opened around 2 p.m.

On average, about 150,000 people a day cross into San Ysidro, Bond said. Some 45,000 to 50,000 cars, 25,000 to 30,000 pedestrians, and 200 buses make the daily crossing.

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