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US shutdown pits unpaid workers vs. political establishment and unions

The political stalemate over the partial shutdown of the US government deepened this week. In the wake of President Trump's last-minute intervention Thursday to scuttle House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to a military base in Afghanistan, even the pretense of negotiations between the White House and Congress has been scrapped.

With no political agreement in sight, there are growing fears within the ruling class that the lockout of 300,000 furloughed federal workers and forced unpaid labor for an additional 500,000 employees, now heading into the fifth week, could well prompt the working class to seek its own way out of the impasse.



Democratic party and union officials address a rally of federal workers in Chicago on Friday

While Democratic and Republican officials have been careful to avoid such suggestions for the record, reporters with close connections to the corridors of power are beginning to reflect these concerns.

Robert Costa, a *Washington Post* reporter and political analyst for NBC News, tweeted this week, “Couple senior Republican lawmakers tell me the only way this breaks open is if TSA employees stay home and Americans get furious about their flights. That’s the only out, they say. And they’re close to the [White House].”

Similarly, Chuck Todd of NBC’s “Meet the Press” remarked during an interview Thursday on NBC News that the only thing that could force a deal to end the shutdown was a strike by airport luggage screeners and air traffic controllers, bringing the nation’s commercial air travel system to a standstill.

McKay Coppins, who covers the Republican Party for the *Atlantic*, spoke to congressional staffers from both parties about how the shutdown might end. “A grim but growing consensus has begun to emerge on Capitol Hill,” he wrote in an article published Friday. “There may be no way out of this mess until something disastrous happens.” Included in the list of potential disasters cited by congressional aides were a terrorist incident and a strike by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screeners.

The danger for the ruling class of workers taking matters into their own hands and mounting an offensive against the shutdown is heightened by the fact that it would involve defiance of federal laws that ban strikes by public employees. Mass action would directly challenge the legacy of the PATCO strike of 1981.

The savage response of the Reagan administration—following the playbook that had been drawn up by the preceding Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter—in firing 11,000 controllers, outlawing the PATCO union, blacklisting all of the strikers for life and imprisoning local union leaders, has served to intimidate public-sector workers ever since. The smashing of the PATCO strike, possible only because of the complicity of the AFL-CIO leadership, was the signal for a wave of strikebreaking, wage-cutting and attacks on previous social gains such as healthcare and education that has continued to the present day, under Democratic no less than Republican administrations.

In the context of this week's teachers strike in Los Angeles and expanding workers' struggles internationally, any move by federal workers could trigger a much broader fight back against social inequality and the gutting of social programs.

The talk within the political and media establishment of the possibility of a rebellion by federal workers places in sharp relief the cowardly and treacherous silence of the government employee unions and the AFL-CIO. It underscores the degree to which the ruling class relies on these anti-working class and pro-corporate organizations to suppress the class struggle.

A full four weeks into the shutdown, with the ruling class and its state apparatus paralyzed by internal warfare, the defining feature of the unions' response has been their absolute refusal to organize any type of job action. Sickouts by TSA workers and others who have already missed one paycheck are growing spontaneously, without any encouragement or support from the unions.

When compelled to respond to calls for strike action, the unions have been quick to uphold the authority of anti-strike laws and cite the fate of PATCO, while saying nothing about the government's violation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery and indentured servitude.

World Socialist Web Site reporters have heard from multiple air traffic controllers that their union, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, has demanded that the membership keep quiet. They've been told not to speak to the press without authorization. The unions are collaborating with the Trump administration to censor and suppress workers' voices. The Federal Aviation Administration recently sent an email warning

employees who have been forced to work without pay that they are “accountable for the statements they make and the views they express during duty and/or off-duty time.”

In so far as the unions have organized demonstrations, they have been limited to one or two local agencies. Slogans advanced by the unions are restricted to empty apolitical chants like “End the shutdown” and “We want to work.” The AFL-CIO and its adjuncts have made no effort to organize any mass demonstrations of federal workers or other sections of the population affected by the shutdown.

Instead, union officials are directing members to take part in their #CallTheVote campaign, trailing behind the Democratic Party in pressuring Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to call a vote on the funding bills passed by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives. Together with a failed attempt to get the courts to intervene to end the shutdown, the unions seek to channel all opposition into the dead end of the Democratic Party.

They say nothing about Trump’s savage anti-immigrant policies, which the administration chose as the justification for the shutdown, in the form of an ultimatum on funding for his US-Mexico border wall. In this they again trail the Democrats, who support the militarization of the border and criminalization of impoverished workers from Central America seeking refuge in the US from the violence and repression caused by US imperialist exploitation and intervention. Their supposed “opposition” boils down to quibbling over how many billions to spend on the border and a semantic dispute over whether to call the combination of fencing, drones and other fortifications a “wall.”

Nor are they opposing Trump’s threat to declare a national emergency, bypass Congress and order the military to build the wall—a step that would represent a turning point in the collapse of constitutional norms and imposition of dictatorial rule.

At the same time, the Trump administration is preparing for the long-term continuation of the shutdown.

This week more than 50,000 locked out workers were ordered to return to the job without pay, including at the Internal Revenue Service, Federal Aviation Administration, Department of the Interior and Food and Drug Administration. The State Department became the latest agency to order employees to report to work, announcing Thursday it had found sufficient funding for two weeks of operations.

Federal agencies are working to ensure that functions affecting favored sections of industry are restored. The Department of Interior ordered employees at the Bureau of

Ocean Energy Management back to work, without pay, to prevent delays to the March auctions of offshore oil and gas drilling rights.

Saturday marks the end of the pay period for most workers affected by the shutdown—the second two-week period without pay. Checks would normally arrive a week later. If they do not materialize, hundreds of thousands will be plunged deeper into crisis.

Already stories like that of Krystle Kirkpatrick, an IRS worker in Utah, are proliferating. Kirkpatrick told *CBC Radio* she's been forced to sell her blood plasma and rely on charity food banks to keep her family afloat.

At a Chicago demonstration of about 50 people held Friday, one worker summed up the feeling of many government workers. "This is a hostage situation," she said.

There is a powerful array of forces lined up against federal workers. Both political parties have demonstrated that they are content to allow the shutdown to continue at the expense of the workers and those who depend on their services. The trade union apparatus is utterly hostile to the interests of its members, actively seeking to suppress any independent initiative that challenges their integration into the Democratic Party.

The reality of surviving a month and counting without pay, however, is compelling workers to seek to fight back. This resistance can be organized only through a movement of rank-and-file workers acting independently and in opposition to the trade unions and the capitalist political parties. To carry forward the fight, federal workers need to form committees of action in workplaces around the country to prepare strike action on a national scale and link up with striking teachers and other sections of workers in the US and internationally.