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Trump retreats on federal shutdown

President Donald Trump retreated from his demand that Congress approve a border wall before he would end the partial shutdown of the federal government, announcing Friday that he would approve a temporary, three-week restoration of funding for those federal agencies where workers have gone without pay since December 22.

It was the second step back by Trump in three days, following his acknowledgement late Tuesday night that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has the “prerogative” to control the chamber of the House of Representatives, and therefore to postpone his State of the Union speech, which had been scheduled for January 29.

Both the Senate and the House of Representatives are now expected to quickly pass a continuing resolution to restore funding through February 15, without funding for the border wall. During that period, negotiations will continue between the White House and congressional Democrats on the amount of funding for “border security” and whether any of it will be directed to building permanent structures along the US-Mexico border.

“We really have no choice but to build a powerful wall or steel barrier,” Trump declared. “If we don’t get a fair deal from Congress, the government will either shut down on February 15, or I will use the powers afforded to me under the laws and Constitution of the United States to address this emergency.”

Trump has previously threatened to declare a national emergency and direct the US military to begin building the wall, a step that would have incalculable consequences for democratic rights and the functioning of constitutional government in the United States.

In remarks later Friday afternoon, Trump seemed to lean toward declaring a national emergency as opposed to a renewed shutdown. “I think we have a good chance” of

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reaching an agreement on the border wall, he said. “We’ll work with the Democrats and negotiate and if we can’t do that, then we’ll do a—obviously we’ll do the emergency because that’s what it is. It’s a national emergency.”

During his appearance in the White House Rose Garden to announce the reopening of the government, Trump said that checks providing back pay to 800,000 federal workers would be sent out as soon as possible. Some 500,000 workers have been compelled to work without pay, after being designated as “essential,” while another 300,000 workers were furloughed and sent home.

The humiliating retreat by Trump came amid mounting pressure on the White House and signs of deepening divisions among Republicans in Congress.

In voting Thursday in the Senate on rival Republican and Democratic plans to reopen the government, the Democrat-sponsored measure, for a three-week continuing resolution with no wall funding, won a 52-44 majority. While this fell short of the 60 votes required for approval, it had more support than the Republican measure, tailored to Trump’s demands, which passed by only a 50-47 margin. Republicans control the Senate by a 53-47 margin, but six Republicans broke ranks to support the Democratic bill.

There were reports of bitter recriminations at a closed-door caucus of Senate Republicans on Thursday, with denunciations of Vice President Mike Pence, who presides over the Senate, as well as Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

At the same time, a bipartisan group of Republican and Democratic senators began discussions on a continuing resolution to reopen the government for three weeks, which was reportedly taken by McConnell to the White House on Friday morning and became the basis for Trump’s declaration that he was willing to sign off on a temporary end to the shutdown.

There were mounting signs of the disruptive effects of the partial federal shutdown on the US economy, including key transportation systems. New York’s LaGuardia Airport had to be temporarily shut down Friday morning because of a shortage of air traffic controllers employed by the Federal Aviation Administration. The shutdown produced a ripple effect of cancelled or delayed flights throughout the northeastern US, although operations resumed at LaGuardia later in the day.

Absenteeism among air traffic controllers has increased despite efforts by the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, the scab union set up after the 1981 smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike by President Ronald Reagan. NATCA issued a statement Friday morning declaring that the union “does not condone or endorse any

federal employees participating or endorsing a coordinated activity that negatively effects [sic] the capacity of the National Airspace System or other activities that undermine the professional image and reputation of the men and women we represent.”

Passenger screening workers employed by the federal Transportation Security Administration, one of the agencies affected by the shutdown, have been increasingly reluctant to go to work without pay, and in some cases unable to afford gas money to get to their jobs. The rate of “call-outs” (absenteeism) at TSA has shot up from 3 percent to 10 percent compared to last year, and security checkpoints have been temporarily closed at many busy airports.

There were also reports of 14,000 sick calls by Internal Revenue Service workers, many of whom were recalled to their jobs in the last week—to work without pay—in order to prevent any delay in the processing of income tax refund and earned income credit checks, on which millions of working people rely to pay urgent bills.

Meanwhile, House Democrats delayed plans to announce a huge increase in proposed spending for “border security.” Representative Bennie Thompson, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, said the new bill would “meet or exceed” Trump’s demand for \$5.7 billion, but the money would be spent on drones, sensors, security improvements at ports of entry and the hiring of more border agents, not on a fixed structure like a wall.

If incorporated into the continuing resolution, however, the \$5.7 billion figure could make it easier in practice for Trump to proceed with a national emergency declaration, since he could simply redirect the \$5.7 billion for the Department of Homeland Security towards the wall, rather than repurposing funds appropriated for another department, such as the Pentagon.