

Partial shutdown of US federal government threatens layoff of 800,000

Patrick Martin
8 April 2011

A partial shutdown of the federal government appeared more likely Thursday night, as negotiations between President Obama and congressional leaders continued. Obama met with House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in a protracted session around lunch time and then reconvened in the evening, with none of the participants revealing any details of the talks.

Authorization for further federal government spending expires at midnight Friday night, when the last of six temporary spending extensions expires. At that point, all but “essential” federal operations will begin to shut down, beginning with the closure of weekend operations like museums, parks and other cultural facilities. On Monday, all federal workers are to report to their workplaces to begin closing them down, except for those services designated as “essential.”

Some 800,000 out of 1.9 million workers will be laid off—the bulk of the civilian work force. The remaining workers, designated as “essential,” will receive one week’s pay for two weeks work, with the promise that the shortfall will be made up after a full budget bill is passed.

The “essential” designation is applied to military personnel and most civilian workers in the departments of Defense, State, Homeland Security and Justice (which includes the FBI), as well as the intelligence agencies. In other words, the entire repressive apparatus of the federal government will continue at full force, but those functions that involve providing social services and regulating business will largely shut down.

Air traffic control operations and federal disaster relief operations will also be maintained, again with the workers at half pay for the duration of the shutdown. Toxic waste cleanup and most other environmental

programs will be halted.

Payments of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps and other benefits will not be affected initially, and are largely automated. But new claims for social benefits will be put on hold for the duration of the shutdown, as well as the processing of paper forms such as income tax returns, which must be postmarked by April 18 this year.

Among the hardest hit areas is the District of Columbia, which operates under congressional control as the US capital. Some 14,000 of the city’s 35,000 employees will be furloughed, and essential services like street sweeping, trash collection and road repair will be halted immediately. The city’s libraries and Department of Motor Vehicles will be closed, but not the public schools.

The Republicans control only the House of Representatives, with Democrats holding both the White House and a majority in the Senate, but the Republicans nonetheless are on the political offensive. They are using the threat of a shutdown to push through major cuts in spending for the current fiscal year, as well as policy measures that would further restrict abortion rights, shut down much environmental regulation and block the implementation of the Obama health care program adopted by a Democratic-controlled Congress last year.

On Thursday afternoon, the House passed a one-week extension, despite the threat by Obama that he would veto any temporary spending bill. The bill was passed on a near party-line vote, by a margin of 247 to 181.

The measure is a public relations exercise to appease the ultra-right Tea Party elements, calling for \$12 billion in new spending cuts, as well as restrictions on abortion in the District of Columbia. It also extends military spending for the rest of the fiscal year, through

September 30, while funding the rest of the federal government only through April 15.

This separation has sinister political overtones. It not only gave the Republicans the chance to raise a McCarthy-style howl that Obama and the Democrats were voting “against our men and women in uniform,” it amounted to an appeal to the military ranks, and particularly the officer corps, to take sides in the budget dispute.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged the significance of this appeal indirectly, while visiting Baghdad. Speaking to a group of several hundred US soldiers deployed in Iraq, he joked, “as a historian it always occurred to me that the smart thing for government was always to pay the guys with guns first.”

The dispute between the Republicans and Democrats revolves around how much to cut from domestic social spending—the Democrats have now accepted \$33 billion in cuts, while the House Republicans are demanding \$61 billion—as well as the policy restrictions on abortion, health care and environmental protection. The White House has so far refused to accept any of the policy measures, known as riders, while offering more and more concessions on the actual amount of the cuts.

According to press accounts, Boehner has proposed a “compromise” at \$40 billion in cuts, while the Democrats have responded with \$34.5 billion. But there are additional disputes over exactly which programs are to be cut, as well as over Republican demands for increased spending on some military and homeland security programs.

At a press briefing Tuesday, Obama acknowledged the extent of the Democratic cave-in on budget cuts, declaring, “We have now matched the number that the speaker originally sought.” He was referring to the \$32 billion in cuts initially proposed by Boehner in January, which was then increased to \$61 billion under pressure from ultra-right members of the Republican caucus.

Senate Democratic Leader Reid admitted Wednesday, “The biggest gap in these negotiations isn’t between Republicans and Democrats. It’s between Republicans and Republicans.”

Boehner denied any differences with his right wing, telling ABC News, “Listen, there’s no daylight between the Tea Party and me. What they want is, they want us to cut spending.”

He derided the White House position, saying, “It’s really just more of the same. We’re going to have real spending cuts. I don’t know what some people don’t understand about this.”

While the Democrats cower before the supposed strength of the ultra right, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll released Wednesday found the Tea Party movement growing in unpopularity. Only 29 percent felt somewhat or very positive about it, the same as in January, while 44 percent had negative feelings, and those with very negative feelings rose from 24 percent in January to 30 percent.

A more narrowly focused question found that actual support for the Tea Party was down from 30 percent in November to 29 percent in February and 25 percent in April, while two-thirds, some 67 percent, said that they did not support it.



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