

US government shutdown closes the National Park Service

Douglas Lyons
7 October 2013

Over 21,000 national park workers have been laid off and millions of visitors prevented from entering any of the 410 national parks and other sites operated by the National Park Service (NPS) since the federal government shut down last Tuesday. It is not clear when they will reopen as the government shutdown drags into its second week.

All 59 national parks and hundreds of other national monuments and other historic sites have been closed, including the Smithsonian museums, the Statue of Liberty, and Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone National Parks, to name a few.

An incredible 280,000,000 visits occur annually, with many people visiting parks multiple times. Blue Ridge Parkway, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and Gateway National Recreation Area are the top three destinations. The national parks provide a relatively low cost vacation for millions of workers and their families. The parks also attract visitors from throughout the world. Tens of thousands of people camping in the parks or staying at hotels inside the parks have now been told to leave.

Roughly 25,000 workers are employed by the NPS across the United States and its territories, but only essential employees, a mere 3,266, can be found working at these sites currently—without pay, according to Jon Jarvis, NPS director. He told National Public Radio, “We retained our law enforcement, search and rescue, emergency medical and fire staff just to provide response to emergencies and to protect the parks from vandalism.” *All* employees, however, are essential for the continual and successful operation of the National Parks and Monuments, including the food and refreshment servers, the people cleaning the buildings and grounds, and those selling tickets and providing customer service. The 21,379 park employees placed

on furlough as of October 1 have no idea when they will be called back to work.

Low-wage, part-time, and seasonal workers will be hardest hit by the furlough, especially if the shutdown lasts several weeks. Rent, mortgages, and other bills will have to be delayed until retroactive wages are possibly paid. Those who are hired strictly for the season may be furloughed earlier than normal, reducing pay needed for the off season, and working college students will lose much needed cash for tuition and books.

These closures, moreover, will have damaging repercussions for local economies. A Park Service study, “Shutdown of the Federal Government: Causes, Process, and Effects,” details the impact the 1995-1996 government shutdown had on national parks and the economy: “Closure of 368 National Park Service sites (loss of 7 million visitors) reportedly occurred, with loss of tourism revenues to local communities; and closure of national museums and monuments (reportedly with an estimated loss of 2 million visitors) occurred.” The service sector will bear the heaviest burden due to these absent tourists.

The National Park Service, an agency of the Department of the Interior, operates 410 units, ranging from the 59 designated national parks to national monuments and other historic sites, but all have been shut down, constituting an attack on the population’s access to culture and history as well as the livelihoods of NPS workers.

On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Park Service Organic Act, officially forming the NPS as we know it today, consolidating as a national service the multitude of parks, monuments and museums that had operated on an individual basis. Expressing progressive ideals of sections of the ruling

elite in this period, the National Park Service offered workers an opportunity to partake of the spectacular wonders of nature and the history of America.

The bill establishing the NPS noted: “The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations ... which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” In contemporary America, however, the bourgeoisie has intensified its ruthless assault on the right of the working class to culture by defunding national parks, museums, and monuments.

The National Park Service encompasses about 27,000 historic structures; 68,561 archeological sites; and 121,603,193 historic artifacts in museums are readily available when open. Specifically, Dinosaur National Monument in Utah has fossils of the *Allosaurus*, *Apatosaurus*, *Diplodocus*, and *Stegosaurus*, and the Badlands National Park in South Dakota has a collection of rhinoceros and saber-toothed cat fossils.

Native American history from the Archaic period of the Pueblo civilization to Pueblo II, III, and IV periods can be found at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Mesa Verde National Park, and Pecos National History Park, respectively. Other sites such as Hovenweep, Montezuma Castle, Petroglyph, Wupatki, Bandelier, Walnut Camp, Navajo, and Aztec Ruins preserve Native American culture and history.

American history, likewise, is preserved at Vicksburg National Military Park and National Historical Sites such as Harpers Ferry, Jamestown, and Fort Bowie. Moreover, the coastal redwood *Sequoia sempervirens*, the tallest tree on earth, can be viewed at Redwood National Park in California, while its genetic cousin, the gargantuan *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, the biggest and “most massive organism ever to live,” spreads its branches at Sequoia, Yosemite, and Kings Canyon National Parks.

Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky holds the longest cave system on the planet, and Crater Lake National Park has the deepest lake in the United States, at 1,943 feet (592 meters). Lastly, at 750 feet or 228.6 meters from the base to the crest, dunes located at Great

Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado are the tallest in North America. This is only some of what the National Park Service has to offer when its facilities are open to the public.

The Gettysburg National Military Park, where the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg was commemorated this past July, is also shut down. President Obama has been invited to speak there in November to mark 150 years since Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, but for now no one is permitted to set foot on the soil of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery due to the ongoing government shutdown.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact