

The class issues in the US federal shutdown

Patrick Martin
22 January 2018

The partial shutdown of the US federal government continued into Sunday night without any clear possibility of immediate resolution. Much of the civilian federal workforce is expected either to report for work only briefly Monday, turning in official cellphones and laptops and closing down their workplaces, or to stay home entirely. As many as 800,000 would be furloughed.

The shutdown was sparked by discussions between Republicans and Democrats on immigration policy, and the outcome will be a further shift to the right in official American politics. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, the chief Democratic negotiator, signaled this with his capitulation to Trump Friday, when he visited the White House for one-on-one talks, and proffered a deal in which Trump would receive full funding to build his wall along the US-Mexico border, in return for legalization of the nearly 800,000 young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children and protected under the DACA program.

In effect, Trump will have used his rescinding of the executive order that established DACA to win Democratic Party support for the building of the wall, his signature campaign promise to the ultra-right political “base.” Such a deal would strengthen Trump immeasurably, breathing new life into an administration that was in dire crisis. That Trump senses the Democrats’ prostration was shown by his decision to spurn Schumer’s offer and demand even more concessions, including a sharp reduction in legal immigration.

The proposed deal demonstrates that the Democratic Party does not want to bring down the Trump administration, but rather induce Trump to be more “reasonable” and involve the Democrats as a partner in carrying out his right-wing political agenda. The Democrats in the end wanted the shutdown, preferably a brief one, to provide a cover and excuse for doing

what they have already decided to do: back Trump’s border wall.

Trump is only stepping up his appeal to fascistic elements, with his reelection campaign having released a television ad saying that Democrats who oppose his attacks on immigrants “will be complicit in every murder committed by illegal immigrants.”

In terms of the actual impact of the government shutdown, the military and other uniformed federal services, including the Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and TSA baggage and passenger screeners at airports will report for duty, although paychecks will be held back until Congress approves retroactive payment, as it has in every previous federal shutdown.

According to the Trump administration—and on this, there is no difference between the Republican president and his “opposition” among the congressional Democrats—the vast American military-intelligence apparatus must remain on duty, killing people overseas, patrolling battlefields on distant continents, and spying on the entire world, including the American population.

As Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan wrote in a memo Thursday, the US military “will, of course, continue to prosecute the war in Afghanistan and ongoing operations against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, including preparation of forces for deployment into those conflicts.”

But federal government functions that actually relate to the health and welfare of the American people will be shut down as inessential. This includes furloughing more than 60 percent of the staff of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (under conditions of a rampaging nationwide flu epidemic), 80 percent of the Department of Education (including supplementary funding for local public schools throughout the country), and a staggering 95 percent of the employees of the National Transportation Safety Board, (shutting

down investigations into such disasters as the recent commuter rail crash in Washington state).

The determination of which federal offices and functions will remain open as “essential” and which will be closed provides an insight into the real character of the capitalist state machine. It corresponds entirely to the description by Frederick Engels, the great collaborator of Karl Marx, of the state as “special bodies of armed men,” including prisons and other facilities for internal repression as well as external aggression.

The social services provided or supported by the federal government were only established as a byproduct of great struggles of the working class, from the 1930s through the 1960s, and are regarded by the American ruling elite as an unnecessary and increasingly unaffordable luxury under conditions of the long-term economic decline of American capitalism in relation to its foreign rivals.

As a political event, the federal shutdown is a demonstration that the American ruling elite as a whole, and not just Trump personally, is “unfit” to run a large, complex society of more than 330 million people. Perhaps the most truthful comment from a US congressman came from Republican Senator John Kennedy of Louisiana, who told the press Friday, “our country was founded by geniuses, but it’s being run by idiots.” It would be more precise to say criminals, but one can expect only so much from a senator.

A bitter conflict between two right-wing parties—driven largely by factional disputes over foreign policy that are being concealed from the American people—now threatens the continuation of basic public services on which tens of millions of people depend. There will be real damage, in terms of health care, environmental protection and other social needs, to say nothing of the wages lost by workers who are furloughed, and the economic impact on small businesses dependent on federal contracts.

The cynical political maneuvering of the Democrats as 2018 begins, follows and flows from their role in Trump’s first year—suppressing working class opposition and seeking to direct it behind the conflict within the ruling class over issues of foreign policy, while in practice facilitating Trump’s reactionary domestic policies.

Whatever the immediate result of the political

deadlock in Washington, there will be no progressive outcome without the independent intervention of the working class against both the capitalist parties. If they are allowed to work through this crisis, the twin parties of the US ruling elite will produce only more social disasters and more attacks on the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of working people, as well as a further shift in foreign policy in the direction of war and militarism.

The central issue facing the working class is its lack of any independent political voice. Working people need their own political party, fighting for jobs, decent living standards, to defend democratic rights and oppose imperialist war. This means breaking with the corporate-controlled two-party system, and building the Socialist Equality Party, in the United States and internationally, as the mass socialist party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact