US government shutdown may extend into January

Patrick Martin
24 December 2018

All indications are that the partial shutdown of the US federal government, which began at 12:01 a.m. Saturday, will last at least a week, and likely into the New Year. Some 800,000 federal workers are affected, either working without paychecks—if they are designated as "essential"—or furloughed without pay until Congress enacts a new spending authorization.

In general, police repression and mass surveillance are considered "essential" functions of the federal government, while anything to do with providing actual services to the public is considered "inessential."

The shutdown was triggered by President Trump's somersault on whether to sign a "continuing resolution" that would have funded nine federal departments and agencies through February 8. The Senate passed the resolution Wednesday by 100–0 after the White House indicated approval. After ferocious attacks by right-wing talk show hosts on the failure of the resolution to fund the proposed wall on the US-Mexico border, Trump abruptly reversed himself.

On Thursday, the lame duck session of the House of Representatives concluded with a 215–177 near-party line vote on a new version of the continuing resolution, with $5.7 billion for the wall, even more than the $5 billion Trump was demanding. That version of the resolution could not pass the Senate, narrowly controlled by the Republicans by a 51–49 margin, since ending debate and bringing the measure to a vote requires approval by 60 senators.

Both the House and Senate convened Saturday, after the partial federal shutdown had begun, but took no action. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell scheduled the next regular meeting of the Senate for Thursday, December 27, although he indicated that the session will be canceled if no agreement is worked out in the interim between the White House and Senate Democrats.

White House budget director Mick Mulvaney, who becomes Trump's acting chief of staff on January 1, replacing Gen. John Kelly, told several Sunday television interview programs that the administration fully expected the partial federal shutdown could extend into January.

"I don't think things are going to move very quickly here for the next couple days," he told Fox News Sunday. "I think it's very possible the shutdown will go beyond the 28th and into the new Congress." The new Congress convenes on January 3, with the Democrats in control of the House of Representatives and longtime Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi expected to become House speaker.

Pelosi sent a "dear colleague" letter to incoming members of the House Democratic caucus Saturday, declaring that if there is no funding agreement by January 3, "the new House Democratic majority will swiftly pass legislation to reopen government." However, any such resolution, even if it should pass the Senate, could be vetoed by Trump, with little chance of a two-thirds vote to override in either house.

For the workers affected, the partial shutdown means roughly half are furloughed, about 380,000, including the bulk of the work force in the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, Interior (including the National Park Service), Transportation, and the Treasury (including the Internal Revenue Service), as well as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Securities and Exchange Commission and other regulatory agencies, and the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA).

Another 420,000 must report to work but won't receive paychecks. The latter include most employees

© World Socialist Web Site

of the Department of Homeland Security (including the Border Patrol and TSA passenger and baggage screeners at airports), the Department of Justice (including the FBI), and the Department of State (all US embassies will remain open).

In all previous shutdowns, the legislation that eventually ended the crisis included retroactive pay for all affected federal workers, but there is no guarantee that such a deal is in the works this time.

Because appropriations bills for the departments of Defense, Education, Energy, Labor, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs were passed earlier this year, these agencies will be unaffected. The military and intelligence agencies such as the CIA will receive full pay, VA hospitals will operate normally, Social Security checks will be sent out, and Medicare and Medicaid will be funded.

The timing of the confrontation over the wall indicates that both sides have chosen it for their own reactionary political purposes.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, in a speech on the Senate floor Saturday, said the partial shutdown was "because of one person and one person alone: President Trump." He continued, "If you want to open the government, you must abandon the wall, plain and simple."

The Democrats never issued such an ultimatum during previous clashes with the Trump administration. They did not impose a legislative blockade when Trump implemented his Muslim travel ban, when the Department of Homeland Security was forcibly separating families, or when Trump praised white supremacists in Charlottesville.

Despite their public pretense of adamant opposition to the border wall, the Democrats previously agreed to fund it as part of a deal that included a limited amnesty for immigrant youth covered by the DACA program (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

They chose to make a stand only after Trump ordered the pullout of US forces from Syria and a partial withdrawal from Afghanistan, provoking the resignation of the defense secretary, General James Mattis. Schumer openly linked the Mattis resignation and the federal shutdown in his comments Saturday, saying that Trump was responsible for the twin crises.

As for the White House, Trump has chosen to force a federal shutdown to appeal to his ultra-right base, not only on the issue of building the border wall, but more generally, in a show of defiance directed at the incoming Democratic majority in the House and against those sections of the military-intelligence apparatus that have engineered the Mueller investigation, based on bogus allegations of Russian intervention in the 2016 presidential campaign to help Trump win.

Trump further escalated the political confrontation over his shift in foreign policy by announcing Sunday that he would not allow Defense Secretary Mattis to remain in office through February 28, 2019, as Mattis proposed in his resignation letter. Instead, Mattis will be removed effective January 1 and replaced by Deputy Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, a former Boeing executive.

The crisis-stricken character of the Trump administration is demonstrated by the fact that when 2019 begins it will have an acting White House chief of staff, an acting secretary of defense, an acting attorney general, and an acting ambassador to the United Nations, while the secretary of interior, Ryan Zinke, has resigned facing nine corruption probes.

While it is possible that the Democrats and Trump will prolong the shutdown for some period of time as part of the broader conflict within the US ruling elite, the outlines of a deal over the specific cause of the shutdown, funding for the border wall, have already been sketched.

According to the *Hill*, Vice President Mike Pence and Senate Minority Leader Schumer have exchanged offers, with the White House reducing its "ask" for the border from $5 billion to $2.1 billion, provided there is no restriction on how the money can be spent. The Democrats had previously offered $1.6 billion, but with no money provided for the wall.

This difference could be overcome without difficulty, as Republican Senator David Perdue of Georgia pointed out in a cynical comment to *Politico*. "I talked to four Democrats that said: 'Look, if you just stop calling it the wall, we're in,'" he said.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site