

Federal workers thrown into crisis by US government shutdown

Barry Grey**27 December 2018**

Those most directly victimized by the political play-acting between the Trump White House and the Democratic Party over Trump's demand for a border wall, which has resulted in the third federal government shutdown this year, are the hundreds of thousands of federal workers who have been furloughed or forced to work without pay.

The partial shutdown, which began at 12:01 AM last Saturday, is entering its sixth day with no end in sight. National Public Radio reported Wednesday, "Sentiment on Capitol Hill is that the closure could continue through the middle of January..."

It is almost certain that the lockout of 380,000 workers and payless workdays for another 420,000 employees who are deemed "essential," including the bulk of border agents and FBI personnel as well as airport baggage and passenger screeners, will continue into the New Year. This means the 800,000 federal employees affected (out of a total of 2.1 million) will miss at least one paycheck.

This is under conditions where 80 percent of Americans live from paycheck to paycheck and household debt rose to a record \$13.5 trillion by the third quarter of this year, as stagnant wages forced workers to go deeper into debt to pay their bills.

After previous shutdowns, measures were enacted providing retroactive pay to furloughed workers and those forced to work without pay, but there is no guarantee that will happen this time. Moreover, many thousands of janitors, food service workers and others who work at federal facilities are contract workers, who often have not been repaid for missed work due to shutdowns.

The stalemate between the White House and the Democrats is not a principled struggle over immigration policy or any other issue. Last week,

Trump reversed his previous agreement to sign a bipartisan "continuing resolution" that would have extended funding to nine federal departments and numerous agencies until February 8 without providing money for the wall, after he came under fierce attack from ultra-right talk radio and the far-right Republican Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives.

He decided to trigger a shutdown of the affected departments over the demand that any spending bill include \$5 billion earmarked for his wall along the US-Mexico border. This was a maneuver to mobilize support from his far-right, anti-immigrant base to counter mounting legal and political threats bound up with investigations into his business affairs and the probe by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election and collusion by the Trump campaign.

The policy wars in Washington reached new heights when Trump announced he was withdrawing US troops from Syria and cutting the troop presence in Afghanistan in half. This prompted Defense Secretary James Mattis, the retired Marine general and butcher of Fallujah, to resign in protest.

It was only then that the Democratic leadership, who joined with the bulk of the media and military/intelligence establishment in erupting in rage against any diminution of the US wars in the Middle East, dug in their heels on the border wall, declaring that they would not support any spending bill that included money for its construction.

This is the same leadership—Nancy Pelosi in the House of Representatives and Chuck Schumer in the Senate—that had agreed last January to give Trump \$25 billion for his wall in return for limited guarantees that the so-called "dreamers," undocumented immigrants protected under Obama's DACA program, would not

be deported. Trump eventually rejected the deal.

The supposed stalemate over the wall is, in fact, a phony war of words, with Trump agreeing to call his wall a “fence” and cutting back his money demand, reportedly to \$2.1 billion, and the Democrats agreeing to \$1.6 billion for “fencing” and other means to further militarize the border.

In this cynical charade between two right-wing, anti-immigrant and pro-war parties, hundreds of thousands of federal workers and millions of family members and dependents, as well as the broader public, are being used as pawns. The big business politicians are aided by the federal employee unions, which are doing nothing to mobilize workers to oppose either the shutdown or Trump’s fascistic attacks on immigrants.

The website of the largest federal union, the American Federation of Government Employees, has a perfunctory statement appealing to all sides to come together and end the shutdown, along with calls for workers to send emails to the politicians begging them to act.

Meanwhile, the anger of federal workers is growing. A Twitter platform with the hashtag #ShutDownStories exploded with activity after Trump, in a Christmas Day address to military representatives, declared that government workers support his action and are calling on him to keep the shutdown going until funding is provided for the wall.

Typical are the following posts:

“I’ve been a loyal, dedicated federal employee for almost 30 years. I love my work. I may have to terminate my husband’s caregiver because it’s so expensive, it’ll rip through any savings we have very quickly. I’m beside myself with worry this Christmas.”

Another worker tweeted: “I am a single mother of 3 with no help. Not knowing if I can pay rent or feed my family next week.”

Daniel wrote: “Broke my lease to accept new fed job for which I have to attend 7 months of training in another state. Training canceled with shutdown. Homeless. Can’t afford short (?) term housing/have to work full-time for no pay/returning Xmas presents.”

Another post reads: “I have family and friends that took back Christmas presents so they can afford rent and food once the paychecks stop. It’s hella expensive to live in the DC area. Everyone I know lives paycheck to paycheck. Missed pay will decimate them.”



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