US shutdown, payless paydays could continue for “weeks”

Our reporters
3 January 2019

A 90-minute meeting at the White House between President Donald Trump and congressional leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties saw no movement towards a resolution of the budget deadlock that has forced a partial shutdown of the federal government, with 800,000 workers either furloughed or compelled to work without pay.

Trump appeared to escalate his demands for a border wall, demanding the $5.6 billion figure passed by the lame-duck session of the House of Representatives last week, while it was still under Republican control, repudiating the “compromise” proposal by Vice President Mike Pence, who suggested a deal with Democrats at $2.5 billion, including about $1 billion for the wall.

The two top Democrats, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, reiterated their support for $1.3 billion in spending on “border security”—limited to technology like drones and sensors, and more personnel, and an additional $300 million for repairs to existing barriers, but no money for building any new structures along the US-Mexico border.

The newly elected House of Representatives, with a Democratic majority, takes office Thursday. Pelosi indicated that the first action after she takes office as speaker will be passage of two separate bills: one to provide full funding for six of the seven federal departments affected by the shutdown, at levels already approved by the Republican-controlled Senate; the other to provide short-term funding for the Department of Homeland Security through February 8, while talks continue on “border security” and the wall.

According to press reports of the White House meeting, Trump said that he would not sign either bill into law, because to do so would make him “look foolish,” in other words, it would anger his fascistic base. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he would not bring up either bill for a vote in the Senate without Trump’s support. Trump said that the shutdown would continue for “as long as it takes.”

Trump called for the meeting to resume on Friday, after Pelosi’s election as speaker, suggesting that her position on the wall would change once she no longer had to be concerned about support within her caucus. But Democrats disputed that claim, and McConnell said that he expected the shutdown to continue for “weeks.”

For the 800,000 federal workers, the shutdown seems almost certain to surpass the previous record of 16 days, in 2013, and is now likely to mean a payless payday on Friday, January 11. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers and visitors to Washington at several locations in the District of Columbia Wednesday.

Ty, a worker in southeast Washington, told WSWS reporters that something needed to be done to end the government shutdown. “You can't take money from peoples' families,” he said, adding, in reference to the fight over the border wall to block migrants seeking entry to the US, “I have a Latino girlfriend. The immigration issue is stupid. Let them in.”

Lakisha, a school worker, said she had friends who worked for the government. “It's frustrating. It's irritating, not knowing if you can make a payment,” she said.

Reacting to the Office of Personnel Management's recent letter calling for furloughed workers to do unpaid labor for their landlords to keep their homes, Lakisha said it was “a smack in the face.” She said she felt terrible about the children who recently died in the custody of Customs and Border Patrol, calling it “absolutely tragic.”

James, a construction worker and native of southeast D.C., said, “I think the shutdown is just crazy. When you don’t have a job, you have bills and bills don’t stop.”

The Smithsonian Institution, the huge federal museum complex on the Mall, was closed Wednesday after having been kept open to the public using reserve funds since the shutdown began December 22. A tour of the Smithsonian

© World Socialist Web Site

is frequently the high point of a visit to the nation's capital, and several people spoke with the WSWS about their disappointment.

John, who works in real estate in Los Angeles and brought his large family to Washington, D.C. for the New Year, expressed disgust at the government shutdown. "We were looking forward to this trip all year," he said. "Now, once we're here, there is nothing to do." John called the idea that $5 billion could even be considered to fund a border wall "disgusting."

Nicole and Vince, who came to the United States from Australia, also were perturbed by the shutdown. "We spoke to some custodians at the Museum of Natural History, they said they assumed they were getting paid but were not sure. That isn't right. Workers don't deserve to suffer for the government's decisions."

Another woman, Nicole, who came to the Smithsonian with her daughter, noted that she had taken the day off only to find out the museums were closed: "On the train [here], I heard the museums had been shut down and checked the Smithsonian web page, which said nothing about it."

Nicole said she had been forced to spend money so that she and her daughter could visit a private museum that was unaffected by the government shutdown. "This is very frustrating," she said, adding "if you're going to spend $5 billion, there's literally 1,001 better ways to spend it than building a wall to keep immigrants out." Nicole called the government shutdown a dream outcome for the extreme right, with national parks filled with trash due to lack of maintenance, and the government services closed on which people depend for survival. "It seems that when you're not a corporation donating millions to politicians, it is hard to be taken seriously" by the establishment.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site