Amid threat of national emergency declaration

# US government workers call in sick, demand strike action against lockout and payless paydays

**Barry Grey**
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Locked out and unpaid federal workers seethed with anger Friday as the partial government shutdown headed for a record 22 days with no end in sight, and paychecks failed to go out to some 800,000 employees who have been furloughed or forced to work without compensation.

In addition, many tens of thousands of federal contract workers could be losing a combined $200 million in lost pay per day, according to *Bloomberg Government*, and most will never be repaid after the lockout ends.

The mounting resistance of federal workers, muzzled by the government unions, is finding increasing expression in sickouts and demands on social media for strike action against the government.

On Friday, Miami International Airport announced it was closing one of its terminals for part of the weekend due to a shortage of available screeners at Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) checkpoints.

An airport spokesman told the *Miami Herald* that federal screeners were calling in sick at "double the normal rate for Miami." He said other checkpoints might be closed if the shutdown continued and additional screeners called in sick.

A TSA screener at LaGuardia Airport in New York City told the WSWS, “I know my co-workers have high rents, mortgages to pay. They don’t know what they’re going to do. A lot of the people, they’re the primary source of income for their household.

“You get a federal job thinking it would be secure, but then they shut down the whole government and who knows when it will be open again. A lot of these jobs you’re putting yourself at risk, for what? You'll get back your pay eventually, but no one wants to hear eventually when it comes to your pay.”

Another TSA worker at LaGuardia, on the job for one year, explained, “Some people don’t have the funds to even make it to work because of the shutdown. They don’t have money for gas to put in their vehicle, basic things no one thinks about until you don’t have an income.”

“Especially Congress,” her colleague added, “I think they forget what it's like to lead a normal life. There are people that are up there in their offices, nice and cozy in their leather seats, totally out of touch with what it’s like to be down here. You can have the rest of the population sympathize with us, which is nice. I think passengers have been nicer to us. I appreciate that. And if they’re not, they do a 180 as soon as they realize we’re not getting paid.”

Asked about reports of sickouts, the screener explained, “They're calling it the ‘blue flu’. It’s nothing organized, just people saying I don’t want to come in.”

In contrast to the refusal of the federal employee unions and AFL-CIO to take any serious action to fight the shutdown, the union Facebook pages are bristling with angry demands for a massive fight-back.

The tenor of the bulk of the comments on the Facebook page of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) is indicated by the following posts:

• It’s about time the workers stage a walk out. No pay no work!. Take the power to the people and demand action now!

• Everyone call in sick on Monday and shut the airlines and everything else down! Let’s strike and create our own national emergency before President Dummy does!!!

From the AFL-CIO Facebook page:

• WALK THE HELL OUT!! Shut down the airports. The shutdown would end in 2 hours.

• Total bullshit to expect anyone to work without an expectation of getting paid.... What do they call that? Oh yeah, slavery!

• Shut down a couple airports. Workers have the power—sick out days!!

• Have everyone go to sick-out days for about a week. Then demand a raise.

As hundreds of thousands of families are unable to meet rent or mortgage payments, cover health bills or put food on the table, and the government fails to carry out basic social

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functions such as food and drug inspection, road, bridge and mass transit maintenance, housing and nutrition assistance, the entire political system and all of its official institutions become increasingly discredited in the eyes of the working class.

Among the 420,000 "essential" workers forced to work without pay are 13,000 air traffic controllers, some of whom posted on Twitter pay stubs listing $0.00 for the pay period ending January 10. Their plight sums up the reality of class relations and the role of the state as the repressive arm of the ruling class.

The government presses them into unpaid labor with total impunity. Yet when 11,000 air traffic controllers went on strike in 1981 to fight for their basic needs--wages, benefits, decent working conditions--the Reagan administration fired every one of them and blacklisted them for life. Local PATCO union leaders were jailed in a witch hunt that launched four decades of social counterrevolution in America.

Meanwhile, Trump on Friday reiterated his threat to declare a national emergency to circumvent Congress and the US Constitution, seize what amount to dictatorial powers and order the military to build his border wall between the US and Mexico. Reviving his fascistic fear-mongering, he once again called the attempt of impoverished immigrants from Central America to apply for asylum an "invasion," and he restated his demand that the Democrats agree to allocate billions of dollars for the wall as the precondition for ending the shutdown.

The Democrats for their part joined their Republican counterparts in closing down Congress for the weekend and leaving town, guaranteeing an indefinite continuation of the shutdown. They had been negotiating behind the scenes for a deal that would trade billions more to militarize the border--effectively ceding to Trump's demand for a "barrier"--in return for limited protection from deportation for so-called "Dreamers," but Trump scotched any such deal.

The Democrats, petrified at the prospect of an eruption of working class protest, are either silent or openly supportive of Trump's threatened national emergency, which would mark an irreversible and permanent arrogation of unchecked executive power. It would set a precedent for emergency powers to break strikes and jail opponents of the government's policies.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi refused to answer questions about the Democratic response to such a development. But Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin of Maryland, a member of the House Judiciary Committee, said, “Declaring it an emergency, I suppose, serves a political function for him, but then it relocates the whole controversy into the courts. If that’s what it takes to reopen the government, most of us will probably stomach our misgivings about it and hope that the rule of law will prevail.”

Since the Judiciary Committee oversees impeachment proceedings, his statement underscores the opposition of the Democratic leadership to any discussion of impeachment for what would clearly be a crime against the Constitution. This is consistent with the Democrats' leading role in the campaign for internet censorship and the witch hunt against Russia spearheaded by the Mueller investigation.

The *New York Times* reiterated its support for emergency rule to end the lockout, writing in an editorial Friday: “You know the system has broken down when the clearest way out of a government shutdown may be for the president to declare a fake national emergency.” It went on to downplay the significance of “a national emergency requiring military intervention” by calling it constitutionally “suspect” and a mere “tactic.”

The growing opposition of federal workers comes together with the preparations of teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland, Virginia, Denver and other areas to strike and protest against the destruction of public education, the mounting opposition of auto workers to plant closures and layoffs, and a rising wave of class struggle internationally, including the Yellow Vest protests in France and the two-day general strike in India.

It is to this movement of the working class that federal workers must turn to mount a struggle against the shutdown and the drive of the ruling class toward dictatorship. No democratic or progressive opposition to Trump will come from any section of the corrupt political establishment. The fight must be waged independently of both big business parties and the trade unions, which function as an arm of the corporate elite against the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to establish new, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle—rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees—to link up the disparate struggles of workers and young people in the US and around the world. The logic of the deepening crisis of the capitalist system, the immense growth of social inequality, the turn by the ruling elite toward dictatorship and the rising wave of working class resistance is the conscious preparation of a general strike aimed at bringing down the government of the oligarchs and replacing it with a workers’ government and socialism.

*The author also recommends*:

Trump at the Rubicon

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