

Sickouts spread, impact widens as US shutdown enters fourth week

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The impact of the longest government shutdown in US history continues to ripple across the economy as more than 800,000 federal workers and many thousands more government contractors try to cope with missed paychecks.

Spontaneous sickouts by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screeners led this weekend to the closure of terminals and checkpoints at two airports, Miami International Airport Friday through Sunday and Houston's Bush Airport on Sunday.

The rate of unscheduled leave for TSA workers, among the lowest paid of federal employees, is increasing across the country. On Saturday, officials admitted that nearly eight percent of the 51,000 TSA workforce failed to report to work. Last year at this time, the absentee rate was just 3.2 percent.

In the Washington, D.C. area, home to more than 250,000 federal workers, a pop-up food bank distributed more than 30,000 pounds of food Saturday to government and contract employees at five locations. "People can't survive like this," Lorette Legendre, a contractor with the General Services Administration, told National Public Radio. "To stand out here in 30-degree weather to get food? This is America? Something's wrong here."

In New York, Keith Polite, a contract guard at the National Museum of the American Indian, spoke Sunday at a press event. He explained that as a contractor he is unlikely to get any back pay. Last week he was forced to use up all of his sick pay for the year just to get a paycheck. He said: "Can you imagine if there's an emergency in June or something like that? I won't have any time left. If I have to stay home I won't get paid."

"I'm taking it day by day, eating Ramen noodles, you know college food, cutting back drastically as much as

I can," Polite added. "I really don't know what I'm going to do if this goes on."

With every day the shutdown continues, the crippling of government services deemed "non-essential"—including housing and nutrition assistance, health and safety inspections, tax services and scientific research—affects a wider swath of the population.

As a result of the shutdown of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for instance, contracts with over a thousand housing providers were not renewed at the end of the year. The number of expired contracts grows by hundreds every month. Absent the contracts, landlords can walk away from the program, leaving recipients of housing aid to fend for themselves. Non-profits that serve elderly and low-income tenants remaining in the program are forced to rely on reserves to make up for missed federal payments.

Ellen Davidson, a Legal Aid Society housing attorney representing federally subsidized tenants in New York, explained Sunday: "God forbid one boiler goes out, because these buildings will not have the funds to keep warm. There are more than 3,000 elderly households in New York who are currently faced with this, as of yesterday. And every day there are more and more."

As the shutdown drags on, demands for action by angry federal employees are increasing. "Civil servants demoted to civil slaves," "Walk off," and "Strike now!" are typical of the comments appearing on union-sponsored Facebook pages, including the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA).

The unions' primary function has been to keep government workers isolated and demobilized. The unions have refused to organize any large-scale demonstrations, let alone job actions.

Instead, AFGE sees its role as counseling members how to live in poverty. It recently announced a partnership with a national food bank service to offer charity to unpaid workers.

The unions have also sought to suppress the voice of government workers. An air traffic controller told the WSWS that NATCA instructed workers that they are not allowed to talk to the press without authorization. AFGE locals sent emails to workers participating in rallies urging them to “keep it personal, not political.”

The attempt to prevent workers from formulating an independent industrial and political response to a lockout and unpaid labor imposed by the government underscores the treachery of the trade unions and their role as agencies of the corporate elite and the state. Their service to the ruling class as industrial police over the workers is bound up with their integration into the Democratic Party.

This was exemplified by the press event in New York on Sunday. Three Democratic congressmen were joined by bureaucrats from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and AFGE, all issuing empty calls for Republican senators to force President Trump’s hand and end the shutdown.

They along with the entire political and corporate establishment are petrified at the prospect of workers taking matters into their own hands. They are well aware that an eruption of sickouts by TSA workers could shut down air traffic around the country.

That is why TSA chief David Pekoske took the unprecedented step Friday of announcing that screeners who reported to work on December 22, the day after the shutdown began, would receive one day’s pay and a \$500 bonus during the shutdown. Pekoske cited “unique authorities provided TSA in law,” the first time such “authorities” have been used during a government closure.

On Friday, Congress also approved back pay for federal workers impacted by the shutdown, the first time such legislation was been passed prior to the reopening of government. That pay, however, won’t be issued until the shutdown ends.

These sops will, however, do little to soften the mounting crisis of well over a million workers and their families directly targeted by the shutdown, not to mention the millions who potentially face the loss of food stamps, child nutrition benefits, housing subsidies

and critical social services.

Only the mass, independent mobilization of federal workers, linking up with looming strikes by teachers in Los Angeles, Denver and other cities, the fight by auto workers against plant closures and other struggles of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it defends, can secure the basic needs of working people.



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