

Growing signs of worker resistance to US government shutdown

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As the partial federal government shutdown, now in its fourth week, drags on, its effects on large sectors of the US population are intensifying and the resulting anger and reaction continue to grow.

On Wednesday, the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) was forced to openly acknowledge what has been widely known for some time, noting in a statement that “many employees are reporting that they are not able to report to work due to financial limitations.”

TSA workers are among the lowest-paid federal employees, living paycheck to paycheck. The impossible situation to which they are subject—forced to work without any income—is prompting growing resistance going beyond the initial form of individual ‘sickouts.’ A TSA representative reported that increasing numbers are explicitly stating that their refusal to come into work is due to financial hardship. These frank statements, by workers who are legally prohibited from striking, are a gauge of their rising level of anger.

The TSA reports that on Tuesday and Wednesday, 6.1 percent of the workforce was absent. So far, three major airports—Atlanta, Houston and Miami—have been forced to implement contingency plans due to the lack of necessary staff, causing increasing delays for passengers. The situation will only worsen and spread as the lack of pay drives growing numbers of workers to stay home.

TSA and other unpaid federal employees are being forced to turn to food banks or donations from the public to provide meals for themselves and their families. At the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, for example, an unused room has been turned into a collection point for donations for the workers. Food banks across the country are expressing alarm that

the demand will rapidly outstrip their resources.

The partial government shutdown is also impacting aircraft safety. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is forcing over 2,200 furloughed inspectors back to work, without pay. These are professionals who are responsible for ensuring the airworthiness of aircraft and for conducting accident investigations. Air traffic controllers have already been required to work without pay.

The wife of an air traffic controller in Chicago told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Chicago has been working understaffed for a very long time.” Even before the shutdown began, her husband, who has been there for 20 years, typically worked six days a week, averaging 48 hours.

Now, she said, they’re on “short breaks and staying longer on position. Are they losing sleep? Yes, even more now.

“The new guys are having a hard time. One paycheck with no pay is bad, but wait until the second one comes with no pay.”

Despite this, when asked by the *New York Times* whether the union would organize any sort of job action, Trish Gilbert, executive vice president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, replied that they “would not condone or endorse any kind of activity like that.”

Federal workers around the country are protesting against the shutdown and its devastating effect on their lives. They are expressing a growing determination to break out of the constraints imposed on them by the government and the unions.

Dozens of federal workers participated in a rally in front of the federal building in downtown Manhattan Wednesday. WSWS reporters spoke to a furloughed Environmental Protection Agency worker participating

in the protest. “This is the second rally we’ve had,” he said. “Today is bigger than the one last week—a fraction of the press though. They must be losing interest.

“I’m still furloughed now, but they’re calling back most of the IRS in our building. If I was them, I don’t know if I’d go back. It’s hard to stick your neck out when you’re by yourself, but it’s getting to the point, especially if we miss next week’s paycheck too, that a lot of people will be fed up and desperate.

“They keep saying that striking is illegal for federal employees. But I took an oath to uphold the constitution. What about the 13th amendment? Isn’t slavery supposed to be illegal? We didn’t ask for this fight, but what are we going to do? We can’t just sit back and keep getting pummeled.”

One of the more than 46,000 furloughed IRS workers being forced back to work without pay, Meeka Katherine, an IRS tax examiner, expressed her outrage in a Facebook post:

“The IRS workers can end this shutdown if we all refuse to work until we get paid they will have no choice but to give in and why shouldn’t we fight? We have been used as pawns long enough we should stand up united and give this guy a taste of his own medicine if he’s gonna hold out our checks and not care if we can even make it to work yet we are expected to be there that’s ridiculous... We need to come together or this could last a long time. We are not disposable and if we go along with this we are just making it easier for it to continue.”

Another federal worker posted her experience, faced by many who are about to lose their homes:

“So I spoke with my leasing office who is under the lincoln property management corporation they are a national leasing management corp. I was informed they have not received any direction from the corporate office. So if rent is not paid by the third of the month they will proceed with the eviction process. I was also advised if u know you cant afford next month rent turn in your keys by the last day of this month and we will work you on remaining balance of lease. So if you rent from lincoln property management please contact their corp office about the effects of the government shut down. Maybe if they hear from enough people they will grow a heart.”

The average federal worker is estimated to have lost about \$5,000 so far since the shutdown began.

Federal employees are not the only workers whose lives are being severely impacted by the shutdown. Many jobs are done under contract. Unlike federal workers, the more than one million people working as contractors are not likely to receive back pay once the shutdown ends. These workers range from janitors employed by companies with contracts to clean federal buildings to professionals in large consulting companies. As invoices to the government go unpaid, growing numbers of workers will be laid off, and some companies will go out of business.

Bloomberg estimates that these losses could amount to as much as \$200 million per day. The ripple effects of this alone will have major impacts on the US economy, even after the shutdown ends.

A growing number of commentators are raising concerns that effects of the partial government shutdown could push the US economy into recession. Estimates vary, but the combined cost of the shutdown is already in the billions. The direct and ancillary effects could well trigger a crisis in the already fragile US and world economy.

Behind the fears of a loss of business and consumer “confidence” due to the shutdown lies the reality of the extreme social inequality that has developed over decades, which is rapidly hollowing out any confidence that workers and young people may once have had in their prospects under capitalism.

The way forward is indicated by the Yellow Vest protests in France, auto parts workers in Mexico and recent teachers strike in the US in which the workers are moving to free themselves from the treacherous control of the unions and social democratic parties and their pseudo-left supporters. Workers must form their own workplace action committees and fight to replace capitalism with a socialist society dedicated to the fulfillment of human needs rather than private profit.



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