

The way forward for US government workers in the fight against the shutdown

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The partial US government shutdown is in its fifth week with no end in sight. Some 800,000 federal workers are facing their second payless payday.

Approximately 500,000 workers are being forced to work without pay, while another 300,000 have been furloughed in what amounts to the largest lockout in American history. Hundreds of thousands of families are being thrown into crisis, unable to meet rent or mortgage payments, pay for medical care or provide nutritional meals. They are being held hostage in a politically filthy internecine conflict in Washington between different, equally reactionary factions of the ruling class.

Donald Trump is using the cutoff of funding for one quarter of federal departments and agencies to force the Democrats to accede to his demand for a border wall between the US and Mexico and other antidemocratic and illegal attacks on immigrants. The Democrats are posturing as opponents of the wall while offering billions more to militarize the border and tacitly backing Trump's deployment of troops to the border and expansion of detention centers for asylum seekers and refugees.

The anger of the government workers is mounting. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) reported Monday that 10 percent of baggage screeners were absent on Sunday, up from just 3 percent a year ago. The rising level of sickouts is a measure of the workers' resistance and desire to fight back.

Even sections of the corporate media have speculated on the possibility of a mass sickout or strike by TSA workers crippling US air travel and forcing an end to the shutdown. But one group has been completely silent on any independent action by government workers—the trade unions.

Instead of organizing a struggle, the unions are telling

workers to seek charity and loans as they wait for the shutdown to be ended on terms dictated by the two big-business parties.

The largest federal employee union, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), has posted information on its website instructing workers on how they can appeal to their banks “to help soften the blow” of not being paid. It is offering an insulting one-time grant of \$300 to eligible members and directing workers to take an interest-free cash advance of \$500 from online payment servicer PayPal.

Similar derisory offers are being made to members by the National Treasury Employees Union and the AFL-CIO.

The unions have directed workers to appeal to the Democrats and Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, exhorting them to call their congressional representatives and leading union members in inane chants of “Mitch, do your job!” at the scattering of small rallies they have called across the country, at which they have paraded Democrats to posture as “friends” of the working man.

The refusal of the unions to organize any independent action by workers demonstrates the objective character and role of these organizations as agencies of the ruling class and the government for the suppression of the working class.

Their backstabbing of government workers is by no means an exception. This is the role the unions play in regard to all sections of the working class.

In California, the United Teachers Los Angeles is attempting to ram through a sellout contract and end the teachers' strike with none of the teachers' central demands met. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association shut down the teachers' strikes last year in West Virginia, Oklahoma

and Arizona after gaining control of statewide walkouts organized by rank-and-file teachers who used social media to break through the opposition of the unions to any organized resistance.

The United Auto Workers is seeking to suppress any fightback by workers against GM's plans to shut plants and lay off 15,000 workers in the US and Canada. The Teamsters ignored a "no" vote by rank-and-file UPS workers and imposed a rotten concessions contract last year.

Arguing before the Supreme Court in the *Janus* case in 2017, the lawyer for the unions, appealing for support from the robed representatives of the ruling class, stated bluntly: "Union security is a tradeoff for no strikes."

This is an acknowledgment from the horse's mouth that the essential role of the trade unions today is to suppress the class struggle and police the working class for the corporate bosses.

This anti-working-class role flows inexorably from their nationalism and defense of capitalism. The unions' support for trade war and promotion of xenophobia—telling US workers that their enemy is not capitalism but their fellow workers in Mexico, China and other countries—is essential to their task of suffocating working-class opposition and subordinating workers to their "own" national ruling class.

The unions are not working-class organizations, but business entities led by officials with six-figure salaries that place them in the top five percent income bracket. They extract dues from workers' wages in order to funnel money into the Democratic Party's coffers.

The president of AFGE, J. David Cox, pulled in a total compensation of nearly \$300,000 in 2015, approximately ten times the starting wage of a TSA worker. During the 2016 election cycle, Cox's union gave more than \$1 million to the Democrats.

The unions are aided in the suppression of the class struggle by their boosters in the pseudo-left organizations, including the International Socialist Organization. An article on the government lockout posted on the ISO's website Monday failed to make any call for industrial action, lining up behind the union officials and against the workers. The most it could muster, referring to the growing wave of TSA sickouts, was the pathetic line: "Could this be organized into a coordinated 'sick-out?'"

The outpouring of support for the government workers from workers across the country and internationally expresses the powerful potential that exists for the mobilization of this sentiment in mass industrial and political action. However, the last thing the Democratic Party and its adjuncts in the unions and the pseudo-left want is a real social movement against Trump that would pose the question of who should rule society: an ultra-wealthy minority of oligarchs or the working-class majority. A resolution to the shutdown that is left in the hands of the ruling class will mean deeper attacks on the living standards of workers.

The logic of the situation makes clear the urgent need for the working class to break free of the unions. The struggle of US federal workers is part of a growing international struggle of the working class driven by the crisis of the capitalist system and the colossal growth of social inequality. This resurgence of class struggle is taking the form of a rebellion against the old bureaucratic organizations that have suppressed the working class for decades and helped the ruling class drive down wages and living standards.

The yellow vest protests in France, the strike of 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, and the teacher's rebellions of 2018 have set a critical example showing that workers can undertake serious action only if they mobilize independently of and in opposition to the unions.

Government workers should form democratically elected rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. These committees should coordinate with federal workers across the country and link up with other sections of workers coming into struggle in the US and internationally, including teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland, Denver and Virginia; UPS and Amazon workers; autoworkers in the US, Canada and Mexico; and the yellow vest protesters in France.

This will lay the basis for mass demonstrations and strikes as part of a political mobilization against the two parties of big business and a fight for socialism.



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