

US government shutdown enters second month

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As another missed payday for 800,000 federal workers approaches at the end of this week, the warring factions of the American ruling class are no closer to settling the 32-day partial government shutdown.

For workers who are being used as pawns in the political standoff, the toll continues to mount.

Among low-wage Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) workers, sickouts continued to escalate, as a growing number of airport screeners are unable, or unwilling, to make it into work. TSA officials announced that 10 percent of its luggage screeners nationwide called out of work Sunday, the first time since the shutdown began that the rate has reached double digits. In a statement, the agency admitted that “many employees are reporting that they are not able to report to work due to financial limitations.”

Statistics are not available for sickouts at other agencies where approximately 500,000 federal employees are being forced to work without pay indefinitely. However, with over three quarters of the US workforce living paycheck to paycheck, the ranks of those unable to afford even transportation to work are undoubtedly swelling.

At the Internal Revenue Service, which initiated the recall of 46,000 employees last week to process tax returns, workers reported low turnout in offices around the country. Many came to work only to request to be placed back on furlough status due to financial hardship. Those forced to work suffer a double blow. They not only receive no paycheck, they are also ineligible for unemployment benefits and unable to seek other work.

In response to forced, unpaid labor, the federal trade unions have refused to even discuss the possibility of collective action, leaving workers to fend for

themselves.

According to the US Department of Labor, nearly 25,000 federal workers filed unemployment claims during the first two weeks of the shutdown. The latest statistics released nationally, which cover only through to the week ending January 5, show a doubling of new claims in the New Year. The number is expected to grow significantly as the shutdown continues.

For the 300,000 eligible furloughed workers, unemployment insurance is essentially a loan, since it must be paid back after they receive back pay. In many states that loan does not amount to much. Mississippi, at the low end, offers a maximum benefit of \$235 a week. In New York, where the cost of living is much higher, the maximum weekly benefit is \$450, leaving a family of four below the poverty line.

In the absence of any real social safety net, many workers have turned to raising cash through selling goods and taking on additional debt. Michael Cohen, who runs a pawn shop near government buildings in Chicago, told CBS News he now sees 10 to 20 federal workers every day because of the shutdown.

Lending companies have also found a surge of government workers seeking cash. Chad Prashad, chief of World Acceptance, which specializes in short- and medium-term installment loans, told the *Financial Times* his company is seeing increased demand in areas close to large airports that employ federal workers.

Wall Street has taken note. Shares of EZ Corp, a national pawn shop operator, rose more than 20 percent over the last month. Enova, the parent company of the predatory payday lender CashNetUSA, has risen by 27 percent since the shutdown began.

A recent study by the Federal Reserve found that four in 10 households in America could not raise \$400 in the event of an emergency without borrowing or selling

possessions. With federal workers now approaching an entire month of unpaid work, the risk of falling or spiralling deeper into debt is growing.

On Capital Hill, congressional leaders agreed Tuesday to procedural maneuvers but little else. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell plans to bring to a vote on Thursday a bill to reopen the government that includes \$5.7 billion to extend the border wall. The supposed olive branch to the Democratic Party is a deferral for three years of actions against some immigrants covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status programs. The bill would also place additional limits on immigrants seeking asylum, including barring children from Central America from applying at the border—a measure that would violate international asylum law and effectively negate the right to asylum for those who fell under its provisions.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer indicated the bill is a non-starter. It stands little chance of gaining the necessary 60-vote filibuster-proof super-majority. Senate Democrats will offer their own bill Thursday to reopen the government until mid-February without wall funding, equally unlikely to pass.

The Democratic leadership has attempted to underscore its support for “border security,” a euphemism for the militarization of the border that has led to the deaths of thousands of immigrants seeking a reprieve from grinding poverty and violence in their native countries. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has offered to add an additional \$1.3 billion in border funding, without, however, any money for further wall construction.

In a sign that the standoff will continue for some time yet, the Trump administration indicated it plans to hold the State of the Union address as scheduled on January 29, regardless of whether the shutdown continues. Speaker Pelosi, who must invite the president to address a joint session of Congress meeting in the House chamber, had requested that Trump either postpone the speech until the government reopened or submit it in writing. Trump scoffed at the suggestion, but his advance team's request for a walk-through of the House chambers thus far has not been granted. The administration is preparing to use an alternate location if necessary.

Despite the tactical divisions, the Democrats and

Republicans remain united when it concerns fundamental issues of class interest, including using “border security” and nationalism to keep North American workers separated.

Collin Peterson, a so-called centrist Democrat from Minnesota, revealed perhaps more than the Democratic leadership would wish on a local radio program Tuesday. “Give Trump the money,” he said. “I’d give him the whole thing... and put strings on it so you make sure he puts the wall where it needs to be. Why are we fighting over this? We’re going to build that wall anyway at some time.”



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