

Looming shutdown of federal government threatens workers with furloughs and missed paydays

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More than two million federal government workers face the prospect of furloughs or forced work without paychecks at midnight Saturday, September 30, when congressional authorization for federal spending ends. As a consequence, starting Sunday, October 1, more than a million federal workers will be told to stay home, while those designated as “essential,” including the entire uniformed military, will be told to continue working as usual but without paychecks.

While Social Security checks will still be issued and other routine automated payments will be made, new recipients and those seeking changes in their benefits, as well as applicants for Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and other social programs will find their cases delayed or put on hold indefinitely. Safety inspections in factories and enforcement operations by the Environmental Protection Agency will stop, and many activities of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, particularly in the wake of disasters, as in Maui, will be affected.

Congress has been unable to pass a new budget by the end of the fiscal year, or to enact a stopgap known as a “continuing resolution” to keep federal workers on the payroll, because of sharp divisions among the Republicans who control the House of Representatives by a narrow four-vote margin. On two occasions last week, a handful of fascist Republicans blocked passage of rules to set the terms for debate and passage of a continuing resolution by the House. These votes, adopted by the House Rules Committee on terms set by the majority leadership, are usually party-line votes. But both rules were defeated by the defection of some members of the House Freedom Caucus, as well as ultra-right Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene.

These House members are demanding that House Speaker Kevin McCarthy accept even more radical spending cuts in domestic social programs (so-called discretionary spending) than those negotiated in a bipartisan deal made four months ago with Senate Democrats and Democratic President Joe Biden. That agreement included major cuts in spending as the price of Republican support for raising the federal debt ceiling to allow the Treasury to continue borrowing and to avoid a default on government debt, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the US and global financial systems.

The Biden administration and congressional Democrats have responded to the crisis as an opportunity to make political hay, based on polls that suggest the public will blame the Republicans for any shutdowns and service disruptions. In an address Saturday night to the annual dinner of the Congressional Black Caucus, Biden put the damage to the US military in first place, saying soldiers “are going to have to continue to work and not get paid.” He blamed “extreme Republicans” for not adhering to the budget deal reached in the spring, but appealed for more reasonable Republicans to “do their job.” He did not rule out reaching an agreement that provides for even larger cuts in social spending than were approved in the debt ceiling deal, and the logic of the whole process on Capitol Hill is a further shift to the right in federal policy on social programs that are vital to millions of working people, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable.

The White House Office of Management and Budget has directed federal departments to activate emergency plans for operating without a congressional budget,

which includes preparing for mass furloughs and suspension of paychecks. Federal shutdowns have become almost a routine part of capitalist politics, with the two capitalist parties treating federal government workers and people who depend on government services as pawns in the bitter conflicts between two reactionary parties vying for political advantage, as they both seek to advance the interests of the financial oligarchy. There have been 20 shutdowns since 1977, according to one tally, or nearly one every two years.

Speaker McCarthy has already agreed to renege on the debt ceiling agreement—without any assurances that the Democrats and the White House will accept lower spending levels—but the group of ultra-right representatives, estimated to number 10 to 15 House members, want even greater cuts than the Speaker has already embraced.

Reacting to the twin defeats, as well as the ongoing threat that one or more of the dissident right-wingers will introduce a motion to declare the speaker’s chair vacant—which automatically triggers an up-or-down vote on whether he retains that office—McCarthy declared bitterly, “This is a whole new concept of individuals that just want to burn the whole place down.”

He is proposing an alternate procedure to appease the far-right group, to enact funding bills for four government departments, out of 12 total, and then put the remaining departments into a smaller continuing resolution. This would, among other things, insulate the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security (which includes the immigration services and Border Patrol) and the Department of Veterans Affairs from any shutdown, assuming that the Democratic-controlled Senate follows suit.

However, Representative Tim Burchett of Tennessee, one of the holdouts, appearing on CNN’s “State of the Union” program Sunday, said he would still vote against a continuing resolution.

Moreover, McCarthy said the funding of military aid for Ukraine would be removed from the Pentagon budget and put up as a separate bill, a proposal that likely ensures a Senate rejection or a presidential veto, since the war against Russia in Ukraine is the top priority of the Democratic Party and the White House.

Other legislative maneuvers of various kinds are under discussion, but the most likely outcome is a deal

between McCarthy and the Democrats, who would supply enough votes to bypass the opposition from the ultra-right. Members of the group, led by Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida, have warned McCarthy that any agreement with the Democrats would trigger a challenge to his speakership. McCarthy only won the office in January, in the face of similar opposition from the fascists, after 15 ballots, when Gaetz and three others agreed to vote “present” rather than continuing their opposition.

Ex-president Donald Trump is allied with the group of fascists and encouraging them to force a shutdown. He clearly regards such an event as a positive gain for his 2024 presidential campaign, at least in part because it could have a significant effect on the US economy, which he can then blame on the Biden administration.

He directly appealed to congressional Republicans to use the budget crisis as a way to shut down the federal prosecutions he currently faces for the January 6, 2021 coup attempt against Congress, and for removing and withholding secret documents after he left the White House. “This is also the last chance to defund these political prosecutions against me and other Patriots,” Trump wrote on social media. “Use the power of the purse and defend the Country!”

On a more sinister note, Trump likely believes that disrupting the everyday functions of the federal government in such areas as operation of the national parks, food inspection, and environmental remediation will assist him in his right-wing populist campaign to establish a strong-man authoritarian government, along the lines of Mussolini’s pledge to “make the trains run on time.”



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