

Trump plans to deny Social Security disability payments to hundreds of thousands of workers

Jerry White
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The Trump administration is using the government shutdown not only to fire hundreds of thousands of federal workers and shut down entire departments but also to accelerate its plans to gut longstanding entitlement programs, including Social Security and Medicare.

According to an article published by the *Washington Post* on Sunday, the Trump administration is planning to make it more difficult for older workers to qualify for Social Security disability payments, which currently provide monthly subsistence checks to 15 million Americans. The *Post* reports that this “is part of an overhaul of the federal safety net for poor, older and disabled people that could result in hundreds of thousands of people losing benefits, according to people familiar with the plans.”

The Social Security Administration (SSA) presently uses age, work experience and education levels to determine whether a person can do other types of work before approving disability payments. If an applicant is over 50, they have a better chance of qualifying for benefits—although only 42 percent of applicants are ultimately deemed eligible under the SSA’s grueling application process, which can take years. Even this is too high for the corporate and financial oligarchy, which regards older and disabled workers who no longer produce profit as expendable.

According to the *Post*, “officials are considering eliminating age as a factor entirely or raising the threshold to age 60,” while also “modernizing” labor-market data used to judge whether claimants can work by replacing an outdated jobs database. It is noteworthy that the *Post* itself admits the administration’s plan to delete “obsolete occupations” from that database followed a 2022 investigation by the Bezos-owned newspaper, which claimed that thousands of applicants were qualifying based on jobs that no longer existed.

The \$11 billion disability program is separate from Social Security’s retirement system. But tightening restrictions is part of a long-term drive to lower Social Security payments

overall and eventually privatize what was once considered the untouchable “third rail of American politics.” Earlier this year, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent described the creation of individual investment accounts—so-called “Trump Accounts”—as a “back door for privatizing Social Security.”

Monthly disability checks barely keep recipients out of abject poverty. According to state SSA data, denials have risen 3 percent in the current fiscal year. The two programs at issue are Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), which pays an average of \$1,538 per month to workers injured or disabled before retirement age, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which provides about \$800 per month to poor elderly and disabled people with little or no work history.

In a paper cited by the *Post*, Jack Smalligan, senior policy fellow at the Urban Institute and former official at the Office of Management and Budget, wrote that if the proposed rule reduced eligibility by 10 percent, 750,000 fewer people would receive benefits over the next decade, while 80,000 widows and children would lose assistance tied to a spouse or parent.

If the rule removes age as a factor, more older disabled workers will be forced to apply for early Social Security retirement benefits, permanently reducing their monthly income. Those claiming retirement at 62 instead of the full retirement age of 66 years and 10 months receive 30 percent less in benefits for the rest of their lives.

At the same time, the *Post* reports, “Social Security is working on plans to rescind a Biden-era rule that expanded SSI eligibility for recipients who live with relatives or roommates receiving help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or other public assistance.” Restoring stricter standards could roll back payments for about 400,000 Americans, cutting some benefits by a third or more.

Such reductions will have deadly consequences. A 2022

peer-reviewed study by Alexander Gelber, Timothy Moore, Zhuan Pei and Alexander Strand for the National Bureau of Economic Research found that disability cash benefits lower mortality, yielding measurable gains in life expectancy, particularly for lower income recipients. This is especially true for SSI, which in most states confers immediate Medicaid eligibility, providing crucial access to healthcare. Most SSDI beneficiaries, by contrast, must wait 24 months for Medicare, and mortality is notably higher during this waiting period than after coverage begins.

The Social Security Act of 1935, which established the first-ever federal system of old-age benefits, was a central reform of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. It was enacted amid semi-insurrectional upheavals of the working class—general strikes in San Francisco, Toledo and Minneapolis, and the sit-down strikes that soon erupted in Flint and other industrial centers. Confronted with a potentially revolutionary movement, Roosevelt pushed through reforms to preserve capitalist rule, later remarking to aides that he had “saved capitalism from the capitalists.”

Both disability programs were later extensions of that act, established under Republican administrations, under conditions of rising struggles by what was once the labor and civil rights movements. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) was created in 1956 under Dwight Eisenhower, initially for workers aged 50–64 who were permanently disabled and had earned sufficient work credits. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) was established in 1972, as part of the Social Security Amendments under the Nixon administration, to provide a minimum guaranteed income for low-income individuals who were aged, blind or disabled, regardless of work history. Over the decades, periodic “reforms” by both parties—medical reviews, “trial work” rules and benefit freezes—have steadily eroded these protections.

The latest assault is being spearheaded by Russell Vought, current director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and one of the principal architects of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. During Trump's first term, Vought pushed for deep cuts to disability rolls. Using the shutdown and the collusion of the Democrats, Vought is now executing the right-wing playbook. Despite Trump's repeated denials that he intends to attack Social Security and Medicare, both programs are prime targets in his administration's campaign of social counterrevolution.

The deployment of federal troops and militarized police to Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and other cities is part of the same strategy—to suppress the inevitable mass struggles of the working class against the destruction of its social and democratic rights.

The first prerequisite for defending these rights is

a complete break with the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy, which serve the same financial oligarchy as Trump. The Democrats, terrified of an independent movement from below, are seeking a compromise to reopen the government and restore “stability” for Wall Street, while the unions police the workforce and block any strike action.

What is required is the formation of new democratic organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees of workers in every factory, office and federal workplace—to coordinate opposition across industries and mobilize the immense social power of the working class. Through these committees, workers can fight to defend jobs, pensions and social programs and prepare a political general strike to drive Trump and his fascist cabal from office.

Federal workers are already drawing conclusions. A contractor told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “They're calling us lazy government workers, saying we don't work. But they're trying to get rid of most of us, to keep only a tiny layer of us. We're marching back in time—to before the twentieth century, when there was child labor and slavery and people only lived to be 45 years old.”

Another worker employed by the Department of Health and Human Services said: “This shutdown is felt by everyone. The unions are not doing anything. This is pretty extreme, and we aren't even receiving emails daily from them. In 1933, when Hitler was coming to power, you would want to shut down his government. But today the federal unions are fighting the most impotent fight ever—they won't strike. They tell us to look to the courts, but the administration ignores the law. The defense of these programs will only come from the working class.”



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