

# Trump administration threatens to fire unpaid air traffic controllers, deny back pay to furloughed federal workers

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US Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy warned Thursday that the Trump administration would fire air traffic controllers who failed to show up to work even though they are not being paid during the government shutdown. Duffy's provocative comments came just days after the release of a draft White House memo stating that furloughed federal workers are not guaranteed compensation for their forced time off during the shutdown.

Friday is Day 10 of the government shutdown, which the Trump administration has used to accelerate its plans to fire hundreds of thousands of federal workers, eliminate entire agencies, gut entitlement programs and consolidate even more power in the hands of the presidency as part of Trump's plans to establish a police-military dictatorship.

Trump has relied on the cowardice and complicity of Democratic congressional leaders who have treated the crisis as routine haggling over programs, begging Republicans for a bipartisan deal that would provide funds for Trump to continue his fascist conspiracy.

An estimated 13,000 air traffic controllers and about 50,000 Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers have been forced to work without pay. Because the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is at least 3,500 controllers short of its staffing targets, many controllers have been forced to work mandatory overtime and six-day weeks well before the shutdown.

Duffy denounced controllers who did not come to work, saying they were responsible for the estimated 15,000 flight delays since Monday. "If we have a continual small subset of controllers that don't show up to work, and they're the problem children," Duffy said on Fox Business. "... if we have some on our staff that aren't dedicated like we need, we're going to let them go. I can't have people not showing up for work."

Duffy added, "It's a small fraction of people who don't come to work that can create this massive disruption, and that's what you're seeing rippling through our skies

today."

Far from denouncing these threats, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) officials issued a statement warning its members that "participating in a job action could result in removal from federal service" and is "illegal." In the eyes of the labor bureaucracy, it is completely "legal" to compel their members to work for nothing like slaves.

Air traffic controllers are facing the same problems—short-staffing, grueling levels of overtime, antiquated equipment—that provoked air traffic controllers to strike against the Reagan administration in 1981. The decision by Reagan to fire more than 11,000 strikers and smash the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) provoked massive opposition, with half a million workers marching in Washington D.C. and broadly supporting a general strike. But the AFL-CIO betrayed the struggle, sanctioning Reagan's union busting and paving the way for decades of corporate-government attacks on the working class.

Trump's current attack on federal workers, however, goes far beyond PATCO.

Trump and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Russ Vought—a key architect of the right-wing Project 2025 playbook—are operating like gangsters, gloating over the firing of thousands of federal workers and threatening to deny back pay to as many as 750,000 federal workers after the shutdown.

On Friday, Trump posted an AI-generated video with Vought as the Grim Reaper, with scenes of him carrying a scythe through Washington D.C. buildings as federal workers stand on unemployment lines.

Denying backpay to federal workers would be a blatant violation of the "Government Employee Fair Treatment Act of 2019" (GEFTA), signed by Trump himself during the last government shutdown, which lasted a record 35 days. The law, known as GEFTA, "has been widely interpreted as

ensuring that furloughed workers automatically would be compensated after future shutdowns,” an Axios report noted.

It continued: “But the new White House memo from the Office of Management and Budget argues that GEFTA has been misconstrued or, in the words of one source, is ‘deficient’ because it was amended nine days later, on Jan. 25, 2019. ... [The amendment] added a phrase saying furloughed workers shall be compensated ‘subject to the enactment of an appropriations Acts ending the lapse.’ ... To the White House that means money for those workers needs to be specifically appropriated by Congress.”

Asked Tuesday by a White House reporter whether it was the position of the administration that furloughed workers would get backpay, Trump responded like a Mafia boss: “I would say it depends on who we’re talking about. I can tell you this, the Democrats have put a lot of people in great risk and jeopardy, but it really depends on who you’re talking about. But for the most part, we’re going to take care of our people. There are some people that really don’t deserve to be taken care of, and we’ll take care of them in a different way.”

In the face of this unprecedented attack, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) has filed a handful of lawsuits and is urging its members to write to their congresspeople. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten’s message is: Nothing to worry about, stay at your classrooms. Other union officials are openly jumping into the Trump camp.

This bottleneck must be broken through the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by federal workers themselves, to organize collective resistance to mass firings and wage theft. These committees, affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) must link up with the broadest sections of workers to prepare mass action, including a general strike, to drive Trump and his fascist cabal from power. Such a movement must be politically independent of the Democratic Party, which defends the same corporate-financial oligarchy as the Republicans.

The development of rank-and-file committees is the only way the massive opposition to Trump, which is being expressed in the growing support for the October 18 “No Kings” protests, can take a politically conscious form.

Federal workers spoke to the WSWS about the fight.

“We’re still working at the moment but subject to furlough at any time,” a worker at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said. “Trump saying he won’t pay us really got me worried. What’s crazy is that the law is there in black and white. It couldn’t be more clear that legally furloughed employees ‘shall be paid.’ There’s no

room to interpret it. It’ll end up in the courts, but even then, that’s not stopping him. He’s got the Supreme Court, and they’re just ignoring the courts anyway.

“So many people are living paycheck to paycheck, and now we don’t even know if we’ll be paid. Whether they end up paying us or not, it shows what is happening in this country. It’s crazy. They’re making speech illegal, even things like calling for boycotts. This is not going to end well.”

A worker at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. said, “We do still have funds to stay open until the end of the week. A lot of people are very concerned about being laid off because we haven’t received anything from the White House yet and no direction.

“Now, they’re saying there’s no guarantee that people will have backpay after, so that’s a major concern now, and just the uncertainty of how long the government shutdown is going to be.

“There could be a possibility where Trump decides he no longer wants to fund the Smithsonian. We are under review. They can pretty much take down the entire Smithsonian, and then there will be no more. I mean, no more jobs, no more opportunities to educate Americans. Smithsonian is one of the biggest educators in the US, so that’s a major concern.

“We can make a bigger statement if everyone comes together and fights against this. That’s kind of how, if you think about American history, there hasn’t really been any huge movements that work without everyone coming together and fighting.”

In a Reddit comment one federal worker spoke of Trump’s Grim Reaper social media post, “More like oligarch death cult. Do these guys think a surveillance state and militarized police will protect them from another French Revolution-style event?”



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