Union apparatus does nothing as Trump launches new wave of mass firings

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The Trump administration has begun issuing reductions-in-force (RIF) notices to federal employees, marking a decisive escalation in its use of the shutdown to impose structural cuts on government services and seize personal control over the government. Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought declared on X, "The RIFs have begun," and an OMB spokesperson confirmed that the layoffs would be "substantial."

Over 4,000 workers are impacted by the initial firings. According to a court filing Friday in response to a lawsuit by federal unions, these include:

- Department of Commerce: 315 workers
- Department of Education: 466 workers
- Department of Energy: 187 workers
- Department of Health and Human Services: "between 1,100 and 1,200" workers
- Department of Housing and Urban Development: 442 workers
- Department of Homeland Security: 176 workers
- Department of the Treasury: 1,446 workers

In addition, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) announced Thursday that civilian, non-law enforcement employees would see the second straight year of double-digit healthcare premium rate hikes in 2026. The government is also proposing a 1 percent pay increase next year for the same employee category.

The mass firings demonstrate that the target of Trump's bid for dictatorship is the working class. As this is occurring, he has sent National Guard troops to occupy Chicago and Portland and support ICE operations. The White House is reportedly in very advanced talks to invoke the Insurrection Act, a move which would abolish civilian rule in the parts of the country to which the Act is applied.

Federal judges have temporarily blocked his deployments. The White House has responded by threatening to ignore the rulings and threatening the arrest of mayors in cities targeted with occupation. Stephen Miller, the fascist architect of Trump's pseudo-legal attacks on the Constitution, said during an interview with CNN that the president had "plenary authority" to militarily occupy US cities. Miller's invocation of the "Fuhrer principle" seeks to place Trump above constitutional constraints.

Under these conditions, federal workers and the entire working class are facing an unprecedented assault on jobs, working conditions, and democratic rights—one that can only be met by mass mobilization of the working class to halt the destruction of social services and block the moves to dictatorship.

These firings go beyond typical shutdown protocol, in which federal employees are furloughed with an expectation of being recalled once funding returns. At the start of the shutdown, Trump posted on social media that he would cut "Democrat Agencies"—i.e., Medicaid, Social Security and other entitlement and welfare programs on which tens of millions of working class Americans rely.

At the same time, threats are being made against federal workers who protest or withhold labor. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy warned that air traffic controllers who repeatedly call in sick could be fired. Flight delays have already surged. Some airports report staffing shortages amounting to 50 percent in certain facilities during the shutdown.

President Trump has even floated denying back pay to some federal workers that have been forced to work without pay during the shutdown, stating that "there are some people that really don't deserve to be taken care of," and that they would "take care of them in a different way." These are ominous turns of phrase that suggest not only firings but even worse.

Under the extralegal "Department of Government Efficiency" under neo-Nazi billionaire Elon Musk, Trump has already cut 300,000 jobs from the federal workforce

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this year, or around 13 percent of the federal workforce. The firings during the shutdown are expected to be smaller, at no more than 16,000 according to the *Washington Post*.

But even if this figure proves to be accurate (and there is no reason to assume it will be), the implications go far beyond numbers, because the Trump administration is using the shutdown as a cover to usurp control over the budget from Congress. Moreover, it will be used to cut or render non-functional key social programs.

The role of Vought, one of the co-authors of The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 platform, makes this clear. This ultra-right document declares as its aim the destruction of what it calls "The Administrative State" and is based in the "unitary executive" theory of unlimited presidential authority over the executive branch. Such authoritarian pseudo-legal theories are behind Trump's deployment of the military to US cities.

Faced with this crisis, the union apparatus has done virtually nothing to oppose the administration's illegal actions and is instead attempting to chloroform workers to the danger. The AFL-CIO union federation responded to the announcement by tweeting: "America's unions will see you in court."

This is absurd given that Trump, who is deliberately seeking to overthrow the Constitution, is not playing within any legal framework. Indeed, the reductions-in-force began Friday even though a federal judge is currently considering the unions' filing for a temporary restraining order against them.

The American Federation of Government Employees has encouraged members to stage isolated rallies calling on Congress to "do their job and fund the government." This not only diverts from the more fundamental issue of fascism but essentially amounts to "demanding" the Democrats reach a deal giving Trump virtually everything he wants under the guise of "bipartisanship," something they are already eager to do.

AFGE issued a statement that it was "time for Congress to stop the political theater and end this shutdown," quoting Local 1237 President Aaron McGlothin as saying, "It's on both sides of the aisle. They need to come together and find common ground."

National Federation of Federal Employees President Randy Erwin went further, calling on Congress to "Do your damn job, and pass a budget that's going to require a little compromise." During a webinar for NFFE members on Friday, the union leadership repeated the same tired phrases.

The Democrats' demands for the partial restoration of Medicaid cuts is entirely performative, aimed at corralling a developing movement against Trump that might grow out of their control. At the end of the day, the Democrats are content with Trump's cuts so long as he continues to wage war in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the unions counsel workers to do nothing. The National Air Traffic Controllers Association issued a statement disclaiming any support for sick-out campaigns as airports closed temporarily due to staffing shortages, encouraging members to "avoid any actions that could reflect poorly on you, our union or our professions." NATCA President Nick Daniels described the shutdown as a "distraction" that must be resolved so that controllers can "focus completely on their vital work."

NATCA has origins as the scab union created after the Reagan administration destroyed the earlier PATCO union by firing 11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981. The refusal of the AFL-CIO to launch a general strike to defend PATCO was a major episode in the transformation of the union apparatus from conservative, pro-capitalist bureaucrats into open agents of management and the government.

The bureaucrats cannot be permitted to immobilize the working class. Trump's coup cannot be blocked by lawsuits and phone calls. It can only be stopped through the independent action of the working class. Such a mobilization must be built independently of the Democrats and the trade union bureaucracy, which either refuse to act or increasingly defend elements of Trump's agenda.

Rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, must be formed in every workplace. Federally employed and contracted workers must unite in a common struggle to demand: halt all firings, suspend and reverse all cuts to social services, preserve democratic rights, and stop Trump's coup in its tracks. Only with this program can federal workers and the entire working class fight to defend social services and block the drive toward fascism.

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