

# “We’re reaching a tipping point”: Unpaid air traffic controllers calling off sick as US government shutdown continues

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Thousands of flights will be cancelled starting Friday morning, after the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a directive Wednesday to reduce flights by 10 percent at 40 major US airports due to a shortage of air traffic controllers.

When the government shutdown began on October 1, the National Airspace System (NAS) was operating with 3,000 fewer air traffic controllers than FAA-staffing targets. Since then, 11,000 workers have been forced to report to control towers as “essential employees” without pay.

The government shutdown is now the longest in US history and many controllers are calling off work to take outside jobs or out of sheer exhaustion. US Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy warned Wednesday of “mass chaos” if the government shutdown continued. “You will see mass flight delays. You’ll see mass cancellations, and you may see us close certain parts of the airspace because we just cannot manage it, because we don’t have the air traffic controllers.”

Many air traffic controllers are weighing their options after receiving their first \$0 “paycheck” on October 28. Years of inadequate wage increases, coupled with record inflation and cost of living have resulted in large numbers living paycheck to paycheck. Now many controllers are being forced to find other work in order to make ends meet.

Controllers have been forced to work mandatory overtime for over two years due to an entirely predictable staffing crisis. Workers who have been forced to obtain part-time work have added those hours to 60-hour work weeks on the “rattler” schedule that has controllers working all three shifts in a week, contributing significantly to fatigue.

Last Friday, the FAA warned, “A surge in callouts is straining staffing levels at multiple facilities, leading to widespread impacts” to half of its busiest 30 facilities that are already experiencing staffing shortages. The FAA also reported almost 80% of controllers at New York facilities were absent.

The Trump administration claims the system is still safe, however. “I’ll tell you, yes, the system is safe and if it wasn’t, we would shut it down,” said Duffy. “But with the shutdown, it would be dishonest to say that more risk is not injected into the system.”

In early October, Duffy threatened to fire “the small fraction of people who don’t come to work.” The White House is using the crisis, along with Trump’s defiance of court orders to fund Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food stamps for 42 million Americans, to pressure Democrats to capitulate and accept a deal to reopen the government.

Angry controllers have spoken out on Reddit and other social media platforms. One worker said, “Not only will I not see a cent of interest on my back pay, plus the lost growth on my TSP [Thrift Savings Plan, a 401(k)-like retirement savings and investment plan for federal employees] and other regular investments, AND the fact that it will take several paychecks to actually get the correct differentials, but it also COSTS me money to come to work. I don’t think they’ll see much of me after Monday.”

“I’ve said this to all who simply claim ‘you’ll get back pay!'” another controller complained. “If an employee owes the gov’t \$ it’s charged with interest...not so on the inverse.”

“Dec 1st Mortgage payment is what I don’t have money for,” said another controller.

“If this approaches Thanksgiving, I don’t think I see many people abandoning their families for \$0,” one said about how controllers who normally have to work holidays might not show for the busiest travel days of the year. “Shouldn’t be abandoning your family any day of the year for \$0,” another controller responded.

Speaking to NPR about the many delayed and canceled flights on Halloween, a Midwest controller said, “What you’re seeing is a lot of people who are truly having to call in sick to go earn money elsewhere. I think you’re also

seeing people who are just calling in sick because they're fed up and they're like, 'well, I'm going to spend the holiday weekend with my kids for once.'"

"I think we're reaching a tipping point," the controller said. "This is kind of about the point in the last shutdown where people just started getting fed up with it."

About a month into the 2018-2019 shutdown, controllers in some key East Coast facilities called in sick for various reasons, causing major disruptions across the country.

The four controllers that NPR interviewed all said morale was already low before the government shutdown, due to long-term staffing shortages previously reported by the WSW. Years of mandatory overtime and stagnant wages also contributed to poor morale, severely aggravated now by failing to get paid at all.

"I work with people that are working a second job at night and are just calling in sick in the morning when they can't go to the job that doesn't pay them because they're too tired," said one approach controller who handles traffic at a major US airport.

That controller said they haven't gotten a second job themselves yet, but they know a coworker who has another job in private security.

"You know, I'm going to join that guy here next week if things don't pan out," the controller said about being able to pay their mortgage.

Duffy claims the aviation system is still safe, though more risk has been added than before. Controllers did not agree.

"It does degrade that margin of safety if a bunch of people are sick and not at work and I'm having to do their jobs along with my own," said the approach controller who spoke with NPR.

Another approach controller detailed a recent night shift. "It was on a bad weather day where there was a ton of confusion and coordinations necessary. Trainees who were around tried to be as helpful as they could," the controller said, but "it was a terrible situation to be stuck in."

"It's clear that the government only pays lip service to the value of our profession," the controller continued. "Otherwise why would they jeopardize hundreds of thousands of people's lives every day this way?"

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association—which organized strikebreakers after President Ronald Reagan fired 11,000 striking controllers in 1981—has repeatedly warned workers that sickouts and strikes are illegal. But a breaking point is coming soon. The Thanksgiving holiday and the busiest travel days of the year are approaching. "I think you're going to see probably the worst day of travel in the history of flight," the Midwest controller said.

This government shutdown is not only a present crisis, but it sharply exposes the worsening conditions of air traffic

control that has existed since the PATCO strike of 1981.

The system has never fully recovered and has lurched from crisis to crisis until now. This 2025 federal government shutdown could become a crisis that the aviation system will not recover from, requiring a large number of permanent flight reductions. Such an event would massively impact the economy as well as jobs in the entire aviation industry and adjacent industries such as freight.

Trump has used the government shutdown to carry out the fascistic program outlined in Project 2025: Unilateral presidential control of government funding, mass firings of federal workers, the gutting of essential social programs and the lifting on any restrictions, including occupational safety and environmental protection, that get in the way of the profit interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

In the face of this, the Democrats have limited themselves to maneuvers over budget issues and have begged Trump and Congressional Republicans for a "bipartisan" deal to resume funding. Above all, the Democrats and the trade union bureaucracy fear a mass movement of the working class against Trump, that could quickly break free from their control and develop into a fundamental challenge to the capitalist system that both parties defend

Only an independent movement of the working class organized through rank-and-file committees in every workplace, can protect the democratic and social rights of workers and the flying public who controllers serve with their labor.



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