

# Mobilize the working class against the US government shutdown

7 January 2019

The partial shutdown of the federal government is a major attack on the working class by the Trump administration. More than 400,000 federal workers are effectively locked out, furloughed without pay. Another 400,000 are engaged in compulsory labor without pay, in violation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery and other forms of involuntary servitude.

The shutdown exposes the fraud of Trump's supposed sympathy for the plight of American workers. It affects increasingly broad layers of the working class and lower-middle class, with the biggest impact on the poorest sections of the population: millions of food stamp recipients, some two million Native Americans, whose tribal services are largely financed through the Department of the Interior, and millions more dependent on other forms of government support for their subsistence.

The population as a whole will be affected by delays in income tax refunds and other federal stipends, by the disruption of air travel as payless paydays drive air traffic controllers and security screeners from their jobs, and by the loss of many other services and facilities.

Even more ominous is the threat to democracy posed by Trump's declaration that, as president, he has the power to declare a national emergency and order the military to build a wall along the US-Mexico border using Pentagon funds, in defiance of Congress. Trump reiterated the threat on Sunday morning, saying that he would decide "in a few days" whether to take that drastic step.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi admitted, in an interview broadcast Sunday morning, "The impression you get from the president is that he would like to not only close government, build a wall, but also abolish Congress, so the only voice that mattered was his own." Pelosi's statement is true, but this only underscores the cowardice and complicity of the Democratic Party and its unwillingness to defend constitutional principles against the growing threat of a presidential dictatorship.

Speaking on Sunday television interview programs, not a single leading Democrat said that such a direct defiance of Congress, which under Article I of the Constitution must appropriate all funds spent by the executive branch, would be an impeachable offense. Representative Adam Smith, who now heads the House Armed Services Committee, even said that

Trump had the authority to take such action, based on precedents set in Afghanistan and Iraq. Smith was essentially arguing that Trump had the power to treat the US-Mexico border as though it was a war zone.

Trump's declaration that he is prepared to trample on 200 years of constitutional precedent is not merely the result of his own authoritarian proclivities. Trump's presidency, the elevation of a billionaire swindler to the highest constitutional office, is itself a product of the decay of American democracy over the past 20 years: from the ultra-right campaign to impeach Bill Clinton, to the stolen election of 2000 and the installation of George W. Bush, to the undeclared and unconstitutional wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, to the increasingly open assault on voting rights and escalating efforts to free the executive branch from any sort of judicial, congressional or legal restraint.

American democracy is collapsing under the weight of mounting social antagonisms, above all the colossal increase in economic inequality, as a financial aristocracy of unprecedented wealth controls all levers of political power while the vast majority of working people, struggling to survive, are excluded from any influence over government policy.

The rival claims of the two sides in the dispute over the border wall have no credibility.

There is no "national security emergency" as Trump claims. There is no flood of criminals and terrorists across the border—a Hitler-style "big lie" propagated endlessly by White House spokesmen and Fox News. There is only a growing number of desperate asylum seekers seeking to cross the US-Mexico border, mainly from Central America, to find refuge from a nightmare of violence and crushing poverty that is the result of a long history of oppression and intervention by American imperialism.

Nor are the Democrats conducting a principled fight against the "immoral" proposal for a border wall, as Pelosi claims. Only a year ago, the two sides agreed on a plan to spend \$25 billion on a border wall as part of a larger deal on immigration. Now the Democrats claim to be engaged in a titanic struggle over the difference between \$1.6 billion and \$5.6 billion. But no leading Democrat is demanding the closure of detention camps, the release of refugees and the recognition of their right

to asylum, or the shutting down of the gangs of violent police thugs known as the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The real issue behind the “border wall” confrontation is the ongoing conflict within the US ruling elite between various reactionary factions, primarily over foreign policy—particularly Trump’s orders to pull US troops out of Syria and draw down forces in Afghanistan, and his overall decision to focus on China rather than Russia as the main immediate enemy. More broadly, it reflects growing concerns that Trump is incapable of dealing coherently with the complex challenges facing US imperialism both at home and abroad.

Trump’s response to the Republican defeat in the midterm elections, the seating of a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, and the calls for impeachment from sections of the Democratic Party and the media is to intensify his appeals to his fascist base and elaborate an openly authoritarian program. Unlike previous shutdowns, caused by legislative attempts to set limits on the executive branch, using its constitutional “power of the purse,” this shutdown was provoked and initiated by the executive branch in an effort to intimidate the legislature into doing the bidding of the president, or bypass it completely.

All sides in this conflict within the ruling elite are antidemocratic, working to achieve their goals by methods that subvert the Constitution. Trump openly parades his support from fascist elements like the Border Patrol union and other police agencies, while threatening to declare a national emergency and order the military to build the wall in defiance of Congress. The Democrats operate with the methods of palace coup—the Mueller anti-Russia investigation, backed by the military-intelligence apparatus, the demand for internet censorship to silence socialist and anti-war views, the glorification of generals guilty of war crimes as “adults in the room,” and now appeals to sections of the military to intervene against the president.

What unites both factions is their common fear of any independent intervention by the working class. The Democrats are in terror of doing anything that might encourage direct working class opposition to the Trump administration and the shutdown.

In this crisis, the federal government unions are acting as nothing more than extensions of the Democratic Party. They have not called a single demonstration or protest, let alone a strike, against what is one of the largest lockouts of workers in American history. When the trade unions represented, even in a limited way, defensive organizations of the working class, such as an employer attack would have provoked protests and calls for support. The refusal of the unions, including the AFL-CIO, to lift a finger is a demonstration of their transformation into an industrial police force for big business.

The working class cannot allow the federal shutdown to continue and permit the vying factions of the ruling class to

inflict ever greater depredations on working people while they work out an anti-democratic resolution that accelerates the drive to dictatorship.

If left in the hands of Trump and the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, the outcome will be more repression of immigrants, lost paychecks and jobs for federal workers and contract employees, further erosion of social programs, and potentially an open breach with constitutional norms and the emergence of an outright presidential dictatorship.

Federal workers must take the initiative. They should prepare protests and demonstrations, sickouts and other withdrawals of labor, organized independently and over social media rather than through the bankrupt and reactionary unions, to demand an end to the shutdown and the restoration of jobs and paychecks to all federal workers and contractors, and a halt to the savage persecution of immigrants on the US-Mexico border and throughout the country. This must be combined with appeals for support from other sections of workers coming into struggle, such as the 40,000 Los Angeles public school teachers set to strike next Thursday.

The last demand is not an afterthought, but a core principle. American workers must recognize that what is being done to refugees and asylum seekers at the border—jailing without trial, separation of parents and children, tear-gassing and other violence, and the building of internment camps—is a preparation for similar attacks on the entire working class. This is how Trump and the Democrats will deal with any movement in the working class in defense of jobs, living standards and social benefits.

The working class must intervene as an independent force in opposition to both parties and the entire political establishment. The logic of such a struggle is the preparation of a general strike against the Trump administration and the capitalist system as a whole.

Workers must draw the necessary political conclusions from the crisis. By threatening to shut down core functions of a modern society, from air travel to health care to public services for the needy and the most oppressed, the ruling class is demonstrating that it is unfit to rule.

The shutdown shows the need to fight for a government of a completely different kind, one based on the needs of working people, not the defense of the property and wealth of a tiny elite. The breakdown of the capitalists’ government poses the need for the working class to take power into its own hands and establish a workers’ government.

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