

US shutdown: Sickouts by screeners throw airports into crisis

By Rebecca Campbell
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Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) baggage screeners continued to call in sick at high rates Monday, forcing a growing number of airports to close security checkpoints and delay passenger travel. In addition to this weekend's closures in Miami and Houston, Washington DC's Dulles Airport and Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport closed several screening lanes Monday.

In Atlanta, CNN reporter Omar Jimenez tweeted: "So I'm at @ATLairport and this may be the longest security line I have ever seen. Even growing up here, and even for a Monday morning. One passenger told me he'd been waiting over an hour and still had about 30 minutes to go."

Figures from TSA officials indicated that no-shows remained more than double typical levels. The sick-out rate Monday was 7.6 percent compared to 3.2 percent at the same time last year.

Expectations are that the workers' boycott will only expand. Airports around the country are preparing contingency plans to deal with shortages of screeners.

The sickouts are one reflection, in an unorganized form, of growing anger and determination to take action against what is now 24 days of uncompensated, compulsory labor for 420,000 workers and the lockout of another 380,000. The mounting resistance of federal workers is now joined by the strike of 30,000 teachers in Los Angeles, the nation's second largest school district.

Without a paycheck, an increasing number of federal workers and contractors are forced to choose between necessities. A government scientist in Brooklyn, New York told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was forced to postpone medical tests on account of the \$175 up-front deductible.

A 31 year-old Department of Interior worker in River

Falls, Wisconsin told NBC News that she has been forced to ration her insulin treatment for Type 1 diabetes because she is unable to afford the \$300 co-pay.

When her blood sugar rose to a dangerous level last week, she just tried to sleep it off. "When it gets that high you can go into diabetic ketoacidosis, you can go into a coma," she said. "I can't afford to go to the ER. I can't afford anything. I just went to bed and hoped I'd wake up."

The impact is spreading well beyond those employed or contracted by the government.

President Trump went to New Orleans Monday to address the American Farm Bureau Federation convention, an exercise in political damage control under conditions where small farmers are threatened with the loss of their crops because the Agriculture Department, one of nine cabinet level departments deprived of funds in the partial shutdown, is withholding subsidy checks. Many of these farmers had already been hard hit by the impact of Trump's trade war policies. The missing subsidies include \$12 billion in compensation for financial losses caused by Trump's imposition of tariffs against China and other countries.

Bankruptcies have risen sharply in some farming areas. The *New York Times* reported that in Minnesota, farm bankruptcies have doubled compared to 2013 and 2014. Things have gotten so bad that dairy associations have begun advertising suicide hotline numbers.

At the Farm Bureau convention, Trump reprised his anti-immigrant rhetoric and restated his hardline position against ending the shutdown unless and until the Democrats agree to include \$5.7 billion for his border wall in legislation to fund the affected departments and agencies. The president also touted his

efforts to gut federal regulations affecting farmers, telling the audience he would “get government off your backs.”

Looming over the prolonged shutdown is the shuttering of agencies that Trump has harshly criticized or even threatened with elimination, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

On Monday, Trump rebuffed a proposal by South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham to reopen the government for three weeks. Graham suggested that if by the end of that period no agreement on a wall had been reached, Trump could act on his threat to declare a national emergency and use the military to construct the wall, an unconstitutional seizure of quasi-dictatorial powers that would mark a major and irreversible step toward authoritarian rule.

The Democratic Party and media outlets aligned with it such as the *New York Times* have either remained silent on Trump’s threat to invoke emergency powers or endorsed it as a way out of the impasse. Senator Graham was joined Sunday on ABC’s *This Week* by former North Dakota Democratic Senator Heidi Heitkamp, who called it a “good idea.” The *Times* has published news pieces and editorials presenting this open repudiation of the separation of powers and congressional authority as a “politically realistic way out of the shutdown crisis.”

Trump, however, has backed off from issuing the declaration, at least for the time being, following opposition from within the Republican Party, principally over the tactical implications of enabling a future Democratic president to bypass Republicans in Congress. As Florida Senator Marco Rubio explained on CNBC’s *Squawk Box*, “Tomorrow, the national security emergency might be, you know, climate change.”

Nevertheless, a national emergency declaration remains a very real possibility.

A retired federal worker told the WSWS that both the Democrats and the Republicans were playing “political games and petty politics.”

“They are ignoring what the population really needs,” he said. “We need programs for broader sections of the population, things like universal health care. Instead, people are going to have their food

stamps cut off if the shutdown continues.”

When asked about the shutdown’s implications for democratic rights and Trump’s threat to declare a national emergency to construct a border wall, the worker said, “The Democrats are treating this like it is business as usual. Around 2007, many Democrats voted for the building of a border fence.

“The US government already claims ‘national emergencies’ to station troops overseas. They did it in Japan. The only difference is now they are doing it domestically.”

Referring to the mass protest in France against the government of President Emmanuel Macron, he said, “I support the calls I’ve seen for federal workers to wear yellow vests.”

On the role of the federal employee unions, he said they should claim that Trump is violating the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution by forcing employees to work without pay. “We fought a civil war over this,” he said. “It’s illegal to force labor. The federal workers could refuse to work, shut down the airports. That would affect everyone. That would resolve this shutdown very quickly.”

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