Private contract workers left without pay following federal government shutdown

By Nick Barrickman
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Following the five-week-long United States federal government shutdown, in which hundreds of thousands of workers were furloughed, huge numbers of federal contract workers have been unable to collect back payments for the time they were unable to work, even though bills, medical expenses and other financial requirements have continued to mount.

The 35-day partial government shutdown, leaving over 800,000 thousand federal workers and an unknown number of private government contractors without pay for weeks, was an unvarnished act of political contempt and cruelty toward American workers. Hundreds of thousands of employees deemed "essential" to the functioning of the state were forced to work despite not being paid, a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which forbids slave labor.

Such treatment led tens of thousands of workers to sell belongings, take additional jobs as well as line up outside of soup kitchens. On Saturday, in an apparent suicide, a Transportation Security Administration officer jumped to his death from a hotel window inside the Orlando International Airport in Florida. While the psychological causes of the worker's death are still undetermined, such an act must be viewed in the context of the stress and desperation confronting the workforce during the shutdown.

While federal workers began to receive their first bit of back pay late last week, workers employed by the federal government's vast network of private contractors were not so lucky.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a federal contractor stated that their company had denied them back pay, unless congressional action mandated it. "My company isn't allowing us any opportunity to work overtime to make up lost wages, nor are they paying us

for any federal holidays that occurred during the shutdown," the worker said, adding that the company is suggesting that they exhaust all of their paid time off (PTO), leaving them with no sick days or vacation time, or simply consider the 35-day shutdown as unpaid time off.

The number of privately contracted janitors, bookkeepers, security guards and cafeteria workers, along with other employees, has expanded as the federal government has sought to cut expenses and privatize its functions. According to independent statistics gathered by researchers at New York University, 40 percent of the United States government personnel consists of contract employees: workers who are employed by private firms doing work for the government, typically for less pay and without job security or benefits. In a comment to *New York* magazine, Paul Light, an NYU professor, suggests as many as 580,000 contract workers were affected by the furlough.

The five-week shutdown was provoked due to a political impasse reached between President Donald Trump and congressional Democratic leaders over the president's demand for funding for a border wall between the United States and Mexico. The dispute could very well result in another shutdown if the President and Congress are not able to reach a lasting agreement on February 15.

For their part, the congressional Democrats have consistently affirmed their support for the right-wing nostrum of "border security," differing with Trump only on the most effective means of preventing poor migrants and refugees from entering the United States.

Various Democratic-sponsored bills have been introduced which have called for the reimbursement of federal contract employees affected during the

shutdown. With no Republican support in either the Senate or the House, such bills are predicted to fail.

Demonstrating oligarchic contempt for the plight of workers, Senator Thom Tillis, Republican of North Carolina, stated to the *Huffington Post* that such reimbursements should be considered on an "agency-by-agency basis," and that some workers were not entitled to receive back pay. Clarifying the Trump administration's preference for the military, White House economic advisor Larry Kudlow told a press briefing last week "the defense-related [contractors] will" be repaid, but that he was "not an expert" on the matter.

The Democratic-sponsored bills themselves are entirely inadequate. The Fair Compensation for Low-Wage Contractor Employees Act, sponsored by Democratic Senators Tina Smith of Minnesota, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and others, would reimburse workers "up to" $965 for every week spent on furlough. This would represent a fraction of the pay lost to workers during the shutdown and would do nothing to resolve their low-wage status in the first place.

The precarious situation faced by federal contract workers is an exposure of the right-wing policies of the American Federal Government Employees (AFGE), the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) and government workers unions charged with the "representation" of the federal workforce.

Last month, as both federal and contract workers rallied side by side in opposition to the shutdown and workers staged sick outs, these organizations beseeched their members to appeal to Congress to resolve the dispute, launching pathetic appeals for congressional Republicans to #CalltheVote to reopen the government. This occurred even as tens of thousands of teachers in Los Angeles and maquiladora workers along the U.S.-Mexico border in Matamoros, Mexico, were on strike against low pay, austerity and other social attacks.

Now, as the government has reopened for the time being, nothing has been resolved for federal workers or their private sector counterparts, many of whom work jobs formerly tasked to public workers.

The plight of federal contract workers demonstrates the correctness of the *World Socialist Web Site's* call for government workers to form rank-and-file committees and to take their struggle out of the hands of the government trade unions, who seek only to restrain their members and keep workers divided.