

Impact on Workers, Partial Shutdown of the US Federal Government

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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The partial shutdown of the US federal government entered its second week on Saturday, with thousands of workers receiving short paychecks December 28 and 800,000 set to receive no pay at all when the next paycheck is due on January 11, 2019.

Both the Trump White House and the Democratic leadership in Congress are completely indifferent to the consequences for federal employees and workers at myriad government subcontractors, as well as the public at large, as the impact of the shutdown is felt more widely following the Christmas holiday.

Wednesday, December 26, was the first regular work day after the shutdown began at 12:01 a.m. Saturday morning, December 22. Workers with weekend work schedules including that Saturday were not paid for those hours in the checks they received Friday. A total of 800,000 workers in nine federal departments and numerous agencies will receive no pay January 11 if the shutdown continues—an outcome that is now widely predicted.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) sent out draft letters Thursday to federal workers who have either been furloughed or designated as “essential employees” and ordered to work without pay. The letters urged workers to call their landlords if they are renters, or mortgage companies if they are buying a home, as well as other major creditors, and attempt to get their payment obligations deferred during the shutdown.

“Speaking with your creditors will enable you to work out the details of any payment plan that you can later confirm with your letter,” the memo says.

The text of one sample letter to be sent to a creditor begins:

“I am a Federal employee who has recently been furloughed due to a lack of funding of my agency. Because of this, my income has been severely cut and I am unable to pay the entire cost of my monthly payments, along with my other expenses.”

The OPM communication emphasizes that the federal agency, which oversees personnel matters for all government departments, will not take any action to influence creditors or provide legal assistance, instead advising workers to “consult with your personal attorney or contact your state or county bar association, many of which maintain lawyer referral services.”

In other words, you're on your own.

Nor will the federal employee unions take any action, other than issuing statements supporting the Democratic Party in the ongoing confrontation over the federal budget and President Trump's demand for \$5 billion in funding for construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border.

National Treasury Employees Union President Tony Reardon told the *Washington Post* he was disappointed that Congress was not in session working on a budget resolution, noting that members have told the union they are returning Christmas presents and taking other emergency steps to pay their rent.

The nine federal departments include six that are virtually shut down—Agriculture, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Transportation and Treasury—and three whose operations are largely unaffected because they are engaged in functions critical to the operations of American imperialism both at home and abroad—Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Justice and the State Department.

Many other independent agencies are partly or wholly shut down, including the Environmental Protection Agency, which has exhausted reserve funds that allowed it to continue operations through Friday, and the Smithsonian Institution and National Zoo, which will close their doors January 2.

Within the DHS, which includes Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Transportation Security Administration, another unit, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, stopped issuing new policies under the National Flood Insurance Program. This will delay or force the cancellation of thousands of home sales for residences in flood zones.

Both the House of Representatives and the US Senate convened Thursday for brief sessions—less than five minutes each—at which one or two Republican members pounded the gavel to open business, listened to an invocation, then ended the proceedings without any discussion or action. Similar *pro forma* sessions are set for Monday, December 31, after which both houses will adjourn for the year.

Congressional leaders of both parties and the White House all agreed that there would be no action to resolve the shutdown until after the new Congress is convened on January 3, with a newly elected Democratic majority in the House and a slightly expanded Republican majority in the Senate.

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi is expected to be elected House speaker on January 3 and has pledged that the first action of the new Democratic majority will be passage of a continuing resolution along the lines of one approved by the Senate unanimously last week—but then blocked by Trump—which would fund the affected federal departments through February 8.

Press reports said that the congressional Democrats are considering two other options: a resolution continuing funding for the affected agencies through the end of the fiscal year next September 30, or a full-year appropriation for all federal agencies except the Department of Homeland Security, which would operate under a continuing resolution while the border wall issue was negotiated.

All of these actions would be for political effect only, since Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell will block action on any continuing resolution or appropriation unless it is agreed on by the White House.

Trump forced the shutdown after his initial agreement to sign the continuing resolution, which does not include money for the border wall, was vociferously attacked by Fox News pundits and right-wing radio talk show hosts. He has since escalated the confrontation in an effort to mobilize his fascistic base through appeals to anti-immigrant racism.

The president pursued this track even on his overnight trip for a photo op appearance with US troops at Al Asad Air Base in western Iraq, where he denounced the Democratic Party in front of the soldiers, claiming that while the troops were defending “another country’s borders,” the Democrats were unwilling to defend the borders of the United States.

There was virtually no response from either the Democrats or the corporate media to this brazen attempt to politicize the military and use it as a club against Trump’s critics at home.

On Friday, Trump continued with this theme, threatening to close the US-Mexico border entirely if the Democrats did not “give us the money to finish the Wall & also change the ridiculous immigration laws that our Country is saddled with.” He concluded with, “We build a wall or close the southern border.”

Such an action would be both illegal—the president has no authority to close the border except in a genuine national security emergency, which hardly exists today—and economically disastrous for both countries. Cross-border trade between the United States and Mexico is approaching \$2 billion a day, and any interruption would have a particularly dire impact on states like Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Trump also threatened to cut off all US aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador if the governments of these countries did not take action to halt the exodus of working people fleeing political repression, gang violence and extreme poverty.

While the corporate media portrays the conflict over funding for the border wall as a titanic battle of principle, the Democrats previously agreed to fund the wall as part of a bipartisan deal reached last February that included limited protection against deportation for young immigrants previously covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which Trump unilaterally terminated. That deal collapsed only after Trump demanded additional concessions—again to appease ultra-right supporters—to reduce legal immigration.

The pro-Democratic Party *Washington Post* published an editorial Friday in which it urged the revival of the February “wall for ‘dreamers’” deal. “Mr. Trump wants money for his pet border-wall project so badly that he’s willing to stage a partial government shutdown,” the *Post* editors wrote. “Democrats should let him have funding for the wall in return for a permanent fix to the immigration status of the ‘dreamers,’” they continued, concluding that “there’s no real issue of principle preventing a bipartisan deal, just the politics of base-pleasing polarization.”

The editorial warned Pelosi not to take too adamant a stand—no danger there!—because court orders that have temporarily blocked Trump’s decision to rescind DACA are “by no means permanent, however, especially now that conservatives enjoy a solid 5-4 majority on

the Supreme Court.”

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