

Trump Escalates Confrontation over Federal Shutdown

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With the partial shutdown of the federal government in its third week, and 800,000 workers facing the prospect of a payless payday Friday, President Trump has stepped up his campaign to spread fear and whip up bigotry against immigrants and refugees.

The White House has requested time from the national television networks for a speech Tuesday night in which Trump is expected to make his case for the building of a wall along the US-Mexico border by portraying refugee families fleeing violence and poverty in Central America as terrorists and criminals. The three cable news networks, CNN, MSNBC and Fox News, and the four main broadcast networks, ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox, have all agreed to air the speech.

Trump administration spokesmen, effectively previewing the speech, fanned out on the Sunday network interview programs to press for the border wall, each parroting the flat-out lie that 4,000 terrorists were apprehended attempting to enter the country from Mexico last year.

The bogus character of this claim has been widely exposed. Even Fox News rebutted it, as interviewer Chris Wallace pointed out to White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders that 4,000 was the figure for everyone on government watch lists apprehended attempting to enter the country, most of them at airports, not the US-Mexico border.

NBC News reported that the actual number of such “terrorist” detentions at the US-Mexico border in the first half of 2018 was six people, not the thousands invoked by the White House as justification for a border wall.

On Sunday, the White House sent a formal request to the House of Representatives and the US Senate, seeking \$5.6 billion for construction of the border wall as well as \$800 million to house, feed and provide medical care for refugee families already in custody or expected to be imprisoned in the first nine months of 2019.

Trump administration representatives portrayed the \$800 million as a “concession” to the new Democratic-controlled House, which has voted repeatedly to reopen the federal departments that are wholly or partially shut down, although each bill passed by the House has been blocked from consideration in the Republican-controlled Senate by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

The implied threat in the negotiations is that if Trump does not get the \$5.6 billion he is demanding for the wall, he will declare a state of national emergency, circumvent Congress and order the military to build the wall using funds already appropriated to the Pentagon.

This would represent an unprecedented step in the direction of a presidential dictatorship.

The Democrats, for their part, are not opposing Trump's fascistic vendetta against immigrants or the adoption of increasingly authoritarian forms of rule. They say next to nothing about Trump's mass imprisonment of immigrant families and children, his deployment of troops to the border, the administration's Gestapo-like workplace raids or its attack on the right to asylum. A year ago, they offered to support \$25 billion to build the border wall in return for limited protection from deportation for so-called "dreamers"—undocumented immigrants brought into the US as children. Now they quibble over calling expanded border installations a "wall" or "fencing."

While Trump appeals to his fascistic base to establish authoritarian forms of rule, the Democrats support the buildup of the powers of the military and intelligence agencies and an intensification of internet censorship.

As Yale Law Professor Bruce Ackerman pointed out in an analysis published in the *New York Times* over the weekend, a declaration of a state of national emergency would fall under the provisions of the 1976 National Emergencies Act, passed in the wake of the Watergate crisis to limit politically motivated assertions of presidential power.

Under this law, any such declaration could be voted on immediately by the House of Representatives, now under Democratic control. If the House voted to overturn it, the Senate would be required to vote with 15 days. The declaration would also be subject to review in the courts. In other words, far from settling the issue, the state of emergency declaration would escalate the political conflict within the US ruling elite to an unprecedented degree.

Tuesday is a crucial day in the shutdown, not just because of Trump's scheduled speech or the return of Congress from a weekend recess, but because if no action is taken to restore funding, it will be too late to avoid a payless payday on January 11. Some 800,000 workers will receive nothing, about half of them on furlough, half compelled to work without pay.

Those designated as "essential" include most federal employees of agencies of police repression such as the FBI, the Bureau of Prisons, Customs and Border Protection, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But it also includes 52,000 mostly low-paid workers at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), who conduct passenger and baggage screenings for air travel. Included as well are air traffic controllers and many other highly skilled workers.

A movement is developing among TSA workers, whose salaries average only \$30,000 a year, to refuse to work without pay. Increasing numbers of TSA workers are calling in sick, an action that is entirely spontaneous and opposed by the union that supposedly represents them, the American Federation of Government Employees.

Press reports suggest that some of the largest airports have been hit, with 150 TSA screeners calling in sick at JFK Airport in New York City and an increase in sick calls at Dallas-Ft. Worth of 75 to 100 percent since Christmas.

Conditions are deteriorating in the national parks, where 16,000 out of 19,000 staff are furloughed, including most rangers and search-and-rescue crews. The Trump administration has chosen to keep the parks open anyway in an effort to minimize the shutdown's effect on

the public. In the course of this public relations exercise, at least seven people have died. Accidental deaths have been reported at Glen Canyon, Yosemite and Great Smoky Mountains national parks. The other four deaths were suicides.

If the shutdown extends into February, with further payless paydays in view on January 25 and February 8, there is certain to be growing support among federal workers for rejecting work without pay. The main federal employee unions have already filed lawsuits pointing out the obvious fact that compulsory labor without pay is a form slavery and in violation of the US Constitution. But the unions oppose any action by federal workers to actually defend their rights.

A shutdown into February would also directly threaten the survival of millions of families on food stamps, since the program is run by the Department of Agriculture, one of the departments affected by the shutdown, and that depends on annual appropriations from Congress. From the standpoint of the political sadists in the White House, however, plunging millions of working-class families into hunger is a welcome development, since they have long sought to destroy the program.

The largest union of commercial pilots, the Air Line Pilots Association, sent a letter to Trump urging him to bring an immediate end to the shutdown, warning that it was threatening “the safety, security, and efficiency of our national airspace system.” Besides TSA screeners and air traffic controllers, the Federal Aviation Administration also employs maintenance personnel and operates a school to train air traffic controllers, which has been closed, cutting off the flow of new personnel into the control towers, under conditions where thousands of controllers are reaching retirement age.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers in the Washington DC area about the impact of the shutdown, outside a station on the Washington Metro transit system.

“The situation is awful. The government shouldn’t be leveraging the pay of federal workers in order to build the border wall,” said Kathy, a municipal worker in the Washington suburbs.

Sharron, a metro transit worker, also expressed disgust.

“There are so many things wrong with holding up peoples’ pay over the wall,” she said. “Even if the government does end up with a wall, what’s it going to change? Nothing.”

“Everyone in this country is an immigrant,” Sharron added, rejecting the claim that immigrants are responsible for “stealing” American jobs.

“The situation is really frustrating,” said Lynn, a federal employee who is being forced to work without pay. “You’re not going to solve any problems by holding federal workers hostage. I have colleagues that can barely pay bills right now. They’re living check-to-check.”

“I’ve been a federal worker for 35 years; my husband is retired from the Navy. At this point, neither of us wants our son to serve. The way things are, it is not encouraging to young adults to want to serve in any capacity for the government, whether that means as a teacher, a social worker or in the

military.”

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