

U.S.A : How Federal Workers Could Fight the Shutdown

Thursday 10 January 2019, by [HANEY Ryan](#), [BECKETT Ben](#) (Date first published: 2 January 2019).

Federal workers have dealt with low pay, degraded working conditions, and repeated employer lockouts. If they want to improve their conditions, they'll have to organize.

The federal government [shut down](#) on December 22, locking out almost 400,000 workers and forcing another 400,000 deemed “essential” to show up to work without pay. Many of these workers are union members, affiliated with the American Federal Government Employees (AFGE). The union is rightfully [suing the federal government](#), claiming that it is illegal to require workers to work without paying them.

But a more militant labor movement could respond to the shutdown very differently, seizing the “[choke points](#)” within the US economy and society that federal workers are strategically positioned to take advantage of.

For example, what if Transportation Security Administration workers decided to refuse orders to work without pay, leaving the airport security gates unstaffed during the busiest season for travel? The airlines would be effectively shut down by a TSA agent “wildcat,” with passengers reluctant to board unsecured flights.

Meanwhile, there's a potential army of 400,000 furloughed federal workers, not just in D.C. but based at government offices across the country. What if, taking a note from the yellow vests movement in France, these workers established “picket lines” blocking major roads and highways, halting all nonemergency traffic? Certainly that traffic would also include package delivery trucks and tractor trailers hauling goods for their own high-demand peak season, many of them driven by Teamsters who are contractually protected when they refuse to cross picket lines.

Imagine the political fallout of this massive economic disruption, all because Trump wants a border wall. Even the MAGA hat-wearers would likely prefer a safe flight home and their packages delivered on time over a wall that they will never even see. The reopening of the government under these conditions would be a massive victory of the labor movement, a product of our own collective efforts rather than that of closed-door negotiations between legislators and the White House.

But unfortunately, this Christmas wish for the labor left was not granted. The reality is informed instead by many years of defeats and organizational setbacks for federal workers.

In the World as It Is

The ongoing holiday lockout is the most recent insult the federal government has hurled at its workers. But pay and benefits have been deteriorating for years, and conditions look set to degrade even faster in the near future.

According to data [compiled](#) by *Government Executive*, civilian federal workers have received an annualized raise of 1.48 percent per year since 2008, including three years of zero raises under President Obama. During the same period, workers' health insurance premiums [increased](#) up to 7 percent a year, though more recently the increase has been smaller.

And this year, President Trump not only threatened a wage freeze for federal employees, he also proposed [cutting](#) their retirement benefits by \$143.5 billion. Congress [counter-proposed](#) a 1.9 percent wage increase, but with the government shut down and no budget resolution in sight, it is unclear whether federal workers will receive raises or maintain their pension benefits this year. A recent study found that federal workers' salaries are already [31 percent](#) below comparable jobs in the private sector on average, though the disparity varies greatly by job title.

In 2013, a [sixteen-day](#) government shutdown effectively locked out 800,000 workers and forced another 1.3 million to work without pay.

This year, the government briefly shut down twice in January and February, and shut down a third time on December 22. This time about 800,000 workers are affected in total, with roughly [half](#) locked out and the other half working without pay. More workers could be affected soon as additional agencies [run out](#) of reserve funds they used to remain open the first week of the shutdown.

It appears that the current Congress has [given up](#) on passing a budget to restore those workers to their jobs, and the earliest the new Congress could take up a budget resolution is January 3, when its members will be sworn in.

Meanwhile, as rent day looms with no paychecks in sight for federal employees ([or contractors](#)) the Office of Personnel Management [suggested](#) furloughed workers try to barter carpentry or painting work with their landlords in lieu of rent.

A Better Future?

With gridlock in Washington and 0 percent raises even in recent years when a Democrat was in the White House, there's little reason to hope the federal government will become a better employer anytime soon.

If federal workers want to stop the attacks on their livelihoods and their dignity, the only realistic path is the same as for any group of workers facing a mean and unpredictable boss, cuts to pay and benefits in real dollars, and unexpected furloughs: they need to organize.

Federal workers won't be consistently treated with real respect and dignity until they can present a credible threat to shut down the government — on their terms, not their bosses'.

As recent [teacher](#) strike [waves](#) across the [country](#) have [shown](#), walking off the job [en masse](#) gets stronger results for public workers much faster than years of concerted lobbying outside the workplace. And in 1970, [postal workers](#) went on a nationwide strike and won significant raises as well as bargaining rights beyond those to which other federal workers are entitled.

Currently, more than 800,000 non-postal civilian federal workers are represented by the two largest federal unions, with roughly 700,000 represented by the American Federation of Government

Employees (AFGE) and 150,000 represented by the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU).

But while federal workers may join unions, unlike private sector workers, they are legally [barred](#) from collectively bargaining on critical matters like wages, hours, working conditions, benefits, or job classifications. They are also forbidden to strike or picket (except for informational pickets on non-work hours). In other words, federal workers may not legally engage in many of the core practices of organized labor.

Federal workers' unions as they currently exist may be well-intentioned, but they are working under a legal scheme that hobbles their ability to organize for what their members really need. Federal workers need unions — and a movement — willing to fight to change unfair laws that give the employer unilateral say in the most critical workplace matters.

The Left must push [sympathetic](#) elected [officials](#) to amend federal law to grant federal workers the same legal rights that other workers have, including the [right to strike](#). But ultimately, neither the law nor working conditions will change without workers organizing for themselves, with tens or hundreds of thousands of them willing to take direct action on the job.

That means identifying workplace leaders and common grievances, developing plans for escalating action on the shop floor, and electing leadership prepared to take on the boss — even when doing so carries risks.

And those risks are real. Failed strikes — whether at government or private employers — are incredibly demoralizing and often have serious material impacts on workers. The risks are higher when the act of striking is illegal. The last time federal workers went on strike in 1981 — 13,000 [air-traffic controllers](#) — the results were catastrophic for the union and the workers. Almost all the workers lost their jobs, they were banned from ever working for the federal government in any capacity, and the union was decertified.

No one should take those risks lightly. Building democratic, member-driven unions capable of changing the law — and, in the interim, breaking it — will be a long, uneven process fraught with setbacks. But history has shown that illegal strikes in themselves are not what is truly dangerous for workers — what is dangerous is [unsuccessful](#) strikes. Half-hearted organizing might be more dangerous than no organizing at all.

There are two alternate futures for federal workers. The first is to let the stability, benefits, and sense of higher purpose that motivate many people to become public servants wither away under a series of ever more aggressive right-wing governments. The other is stable employment, reasonable wages and benefits, and respect for the critical work civil servants do every day.

To achieve this second future, federal workers need to [organize to win](#) at the workplace. To complement workplace organizing, they also need to support class-struggle politicians like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Rashida Tlaib, while also pushing them to change the terms on which federal workers negotiate with the government. If current union officials oppose that vision, it may be necessary to elect new ones, though the main target should always be the boss. Federal workers should start to organize towards that vision today.

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