

Unions and allies blast Trump 'lockout' of federal workers

By Mark Gruenberg
Press Associates Inc.

WASHINGTON, D.C.— With denunciations ranging from “shutdown” to “lockout” to — one speaker in D.C. said — “shakedown,” workers and their allies blasted President Donald Trump’s closure of a large hunk of the federal government and his denial of pay to 800,000 workers.

The sharp criticism came in a night rally Jan. 9 in the D.C. suburb of Silver Spring, Md., and Jan. 10 rallies in DC, Chicago and Kansas City. They came as Trump’s lockout stretched into its 20th day, and after the president stormed out of a meeting with congressional leaders he called the day before to discuss the issue.

At that Jan. 9 session, Trump

bluntly asked House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., if Democrats would agree to his \$5.7 billion demand for money to build a Mexican border wall in return for ending the lockout/shutdown. She said “no,” and he marched out. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., who also participated, called Trump’s action “a temper tantrum.”

Meanwhile, replying to Trump’s prior claim that unpaid, locked-out workers could “make do” or ask their parents for money, Pelosi retorted that, unlike Trump, their parents didn’t have millions of dollars to lend. Trump’s late father, Fred, gave him millions to get his development business going.

Speakers at the rallies, including several of the locked-out

workers, said they want to go back to work, in jobs ranging from meat inspection to airplane safety inspection to working at national parks to researching cases for U.S. Supreme Court briefs.

“At age 71, I need a job,” said Lila Johnson, a 21-year contract worker at the Agriculture Department. Johnson spoke before a D.C. crowd of several thousand who were gathered in front of the AFL-CIO headquarters before a two block march to the White House.

Contract workers like Johnson — such as janitors and fast-food workers at malls in federal buildings — get no back pay even when the shutdown ends. In past GOP-caused shutdowns, regular workers later got back pay, though some had to sue for it.

“Every federal employee has done their job, but the White House has not done its job,” said Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., one of

a parade of lawmakers who alternated with union leaders and rank-and-file locked-out workers at the AFL-CIO podium.

At midnight Dec. 21, Trump shut the Interior, Justice, State, Treasury, Commerce, Housing and Agriculture Departments among others — plus the EPA and other key agencies — which lack money. Trump said won’t sign their funding bills unless Congress agrees to his demand for funding of a Mexican border wall.

As a result, some 800,000 feds, plus three times as many dependents, face payless weeks or months.

Trump wasn’t in D.C. to hear the workers’ chants and protests on Dec. 10. He spent part of the day visiting a section of the border in McAllen, Texas, for what even he called a “photo-op.”

Several speakers on Jan. 10 added Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kent., to

the list of culprits, citing his absolute refusal to even allow solons to vote on House-passed money bills to reopen the government while continuing talks about funding Trump’s wall. Those money bills are identical to legislation bipartisan majorities approved just before Dec. 21. Trump agreed, then reneged.

“Senators, senators, do your damn job!” declared J. David Cox, president of the largest federal workers union, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). “Don’t be scared by the president of the United States. You were elected in your own right.”

But Trump was the main target of the speeches, chants and signs, and not just from union leaders such as Cox, Trumka, Treasury Employees President Tony Reardon and AFSCME President Randi Weingarten. She called Trump’s lockout “hostage taking.”

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eral government’s lowest paid employees: Most make \$16 to \$19 an hour. Portland TSA agent Greg Biel says one of his co-workers has begun driving for Uber in off-hours, while another is selling plasma. Biel is president of American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 1127, which represents 3,000 TSA employees in Oregon, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah. On Jan. 10, he and other AFGE officers passed out fliers at the airport asking the public to call members of Congress to call for an end to the shutdown.

The shutdown is a partial shutdown because most federal agencies remain open (and are funded through Sept. 30). But nine Cabinet departments and a number of smaller agencies have been without funding since Dec. 22. That’s because President Donald Trump said he wouldn’t sign any more spend-

ing bills unless they include \$5.7 billion for a wall along the border with Mexico — a wall he long insisted that Mexico would pay for.

“If we don’t get what we want,” Trump told Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi in a televised meeting Trump called on Dec. 11, “I will shut down the government.... I will take the mantle. I will be the one to shut it down. I’m not going to blame you for it.”

Republicans were in charge of the House and Senate the last two years, and at no time did they vote to fund a wall. Only after Democrats won back a majority in the House did Trump threaten to shut the government unless he got funding for the wall.

AFGE, the largest of the federal employee unions, likened that to hostage taking.

A CBS News poll found that 59 percent of Americans — and 84 percent of Democrats — are against building a wall.

WHAT ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS? NOT SO SIMPLE

Federal workers who are working without pay aren’t eligible for unemployment benefits, because they aren’t considered unemployed. Meanwhile, those on furlough are eligible for unemployment benefits, but if, as is widely assumed, they later get full back pay, they’re supposed to repay whatever benefits they receive. David Gerstenfeld, administrator of the Oregon Unemployment Insurance Division, said his agency won’t try to collect the “overpayments” but they’ll count against whatever benefits workers are entitled to if they apply for unemployment benefits again in the next five years.

Congress could end the shutdown by approving funding for the agencies, but overriding a presidential veto would take a two-thirds majority in each chamber.



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How to help workers affected by the shutdown

As of press time, Portland-based Labor’s Community Service Agency, a union-sponsored charity, planned to deliver 100 food boxes to TSA officers at a planned Jan. 18 airport event, and is collecting donations from unions and union members to provide relief for workers affected by the federal shutdown.

- **Individuals** can donate online at lcsaportland.org/donate
- **Unions** can mail donations to LCSA at 9955 SE Washington St. Suite 211, 97216.