

US Government Shutdown Impacts Millions of Workers

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Amid reports of an emerging deal between Senate Democrats and Republicans on lifting the debt ceiling and funding the government through the beginning of next year, the social impact of the US government shutdown continues to spread.

The deal being hammered out in the Senate would reportedly raise the US debt limit through February 7 and fund the federal government through January 15. The proposal would require that discussions on a long-term deficit-reduction plan that would undoubtedly include unprecedented cuts in Medicare and Social Security along with a reduction in the corporate tax rate formally begin no later than December 13 of this year.

The Democrats have reportedly dropped an earlier demand that across-the-board “sequester” cuts in discretionary domestic spending be ended, opening the way for hundreds of billions of dollars of additional cuts in education, housing, health care, science and infrastructure outlays.

It remains to be seen whether any agreement passed by the Senate will be approved by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, whose far-right Tea Party wing is demanding deep cuts in “entitlement” social programs such as Medicare and Social Security as a precondition for passing any measure to reopen the government or raise the debt ceiling.

Hundreds of thousands of federal workers remain furloughed without pay, while federal employees who provide “essential” functions, such as air traffic controllers, border patrol agents and federal prison staff, will work unpaid until the end of the shutdown.

In addition to the furlough of federal workers, states have been forced to make furloughs of their own as a result of spending cuts stemming from the federal shutdown. Washington State, for instance, has furloughed significant sections of its Employment Security Department, which runs the state’s unemployment insurance program, as federal funds for administering unemployment insurance have been cut.

Meanwhile, funds are dwindling for the federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food assistance program and states have threatened to begin turning away recipients. The program provides food assistance to nearly 9 million low-income mothers and their children. Last week, North Carolina said the program had run out of money in the state, forcing it to temporarily shut down before reopening after the state allocated extra funds.

WIC provides food and nursing essentials to women and infants in families earning up to 185

percent of the federal poverty level and covers 53 percent of all newborn infants in the United States. Program administrators have reported that retailers, including small grocery stores, have turned away people seeking to use their WIC food vouchers because the stores were concerned that they would not be paid by the government for accepting the credits.

The threat to WIC recipients in North Carolina came the same week that food stamp recipients in 17 states were unable to use their food stamp cards, ostensibly as a result of a computer failure by Xerox.

Preschool Head Start programs throughout the country, already battered by the sequester budget cuts that began in March, will be forced to close if the shutdown extends through November 1, when federal payments are due. Some were already forced to shut down last week, cutting services for as many as 7,000 children.

Members of Native American tribes who receive land lease payments from the federal government, on which they rely to pay for electricity and food, have not received their payments since the beginning of the shutdown on October 1.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, which provide short-term cash assistance to families with dependent children, are likewise threatened by the government shutdown. The state of Arizona proposed to cut thousands of people off its TANF program earlier this month as a result of the shutdown, but made temporary funds available. The state's governor warned, however, that the state would be unable to finance the program if the shutdown continued through November.

Government regulation has in large part come to a standstill. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the National Labor Relations Board and the Environmental Protection Agency have all been forced to furlough over 90 percent of their employees.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has stopped inspecting workplaces, while the Food and Drug Administration has stopped food inspection except for meat, poultry and dairy. Over 2,000 Federal Aviation Administration inspectors remain furloughed, dramatically affecting the inspection of airplanes and repair stations.

US national parks remain shuttered and park rangers and other staff furloughed, while small businesses depending on national park tourism have been starved of customers.

Businesses requiring federal permits, such as distilleries and fisheries, have been significantly affected as well, with distilleries unable to bring new products to market and fishermen unable to apply for permits. The Agriculture Department has stopped releasing statistical information that farmers rely on to make planting and harvesting decisions. The department has also cut commodity loans to small farmers.

Some federal courts have been forced to cut back on staffing and will likely have to close after October 17 if funding is not restored, while the Supreme Court has said it will be forced to close after October 18 if the shutdown continues.

The shutdown of the federal government, now in its third week, has revealed to millions of people the complete indifference of the political establishment to their most basic needs. It has deepened the alienation felt by millions of people from both the Democratic and Republican parties. This was expressed in a number of polls this week, including a poll by

the Associated Press-GfK that showed only 5 percent of the population approved of the job Congress is doing, while 83 percent disapproved.

Another poll, conducted by Gallup and released last Friday, showed that 60 percent of the population believed the United States would benefit from a third party, while only 26 percent felt the existing parties did an adequate job. This marks the highest level of support for a third party in the ten-year history of the poll, a drastic change from 2003 when only 40 percent of the population believed the country needed a third party, while 56 percent believed the existing parties were adequate.

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