

Shutdown or shakedown? Trump fires thousands, threatens to steal workers' wages

written by Gary Wilson
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Photo: AFGE.org

Oct. 10 — On Friday morning, Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought announced what federal workers had been dreading: “The RIFs have begun.” With that social media post, the Trump administration launched mass layoffs across multiple agencies during an active government shutdown — an unprecedented escalation in the war on public sector workers.

By Friday evening, pink slips were flying at the Environmental Protection Agency, the departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, and Treasury. The administration wasn’t even trying to hide its glee. Trump himself posted an AI-generated video depicting Vought as the Grim Reaper, scythe in hand, stalking through federal buildings as workers queue for unemployment.

This isn’t normal politics. This is class warfare dressed up as budget management.

The American Federation of Government Employees and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees immediately filed an emergency request for a temporary restraining order, asking U.S. District Judge Susan Illston to halt the mass firings pending an Oct. 16 hearing. The unions are fighting an uphill battle against an administration that sees the shutdown not as a crisis to resolve, but as an opportunity to gut the federal workforce.

“These mass firings are illegal and will have devastating effects on the services millions of Americans rely on every day,” AFSCME president Lee Saunders warned.

AFGE president Everett Kelley was more direct: “In AFGE’s 93 years of existence under several presidential administrations — including during Trump’s first term — no president has ever decided to fire thousands of furloughed workers during a government shutdown.”

But the layoffs are only part of the story. The Trump administration is also

threatening something even more audacious: wage theft on a massive scale.

From layoffs to wage theft

A leaked White House memo argues that furloughed federal workers — as many as 750,000 people — may not receive back pay after the shutdown ends. This would violate the Government Employee Fair Treatment Act of 2019, which Trump himself signed during the last shutdown. But the administration is claiming the law has been “misconstrued,” seizing on technical amendments to argue that back pay must be specifically appropriated by Congress.

Asked Tuesday whether furloughed workers would be compensated, Trump responded like a mob boss: “I would say it depends on who we’re talking about. ... For the most part, we’re going to take care of our people. There are some people that really don’t deserve to be taken care of, and we’ll take care of them in a different way.”

This is the language of authoritarianism. The message is clear: Loyalty to Trump determines whether you eat.

Federal workers are understandably terrified. “Trump saying he won’t pay us really got me worried,” an EPA employee told reporters. “What’s crazy is that the law is there in black and white. It couldn’t be more clear that legally furloughed employees ‘shall be paid.’ There’s no room to interpret it.”

A Smithsonian worker expressed broader fears: “There could be a possibility where Trump decides he no longer wants to fund the Smithsonian. They can pretty much take down the entire Smithsonian.”

