

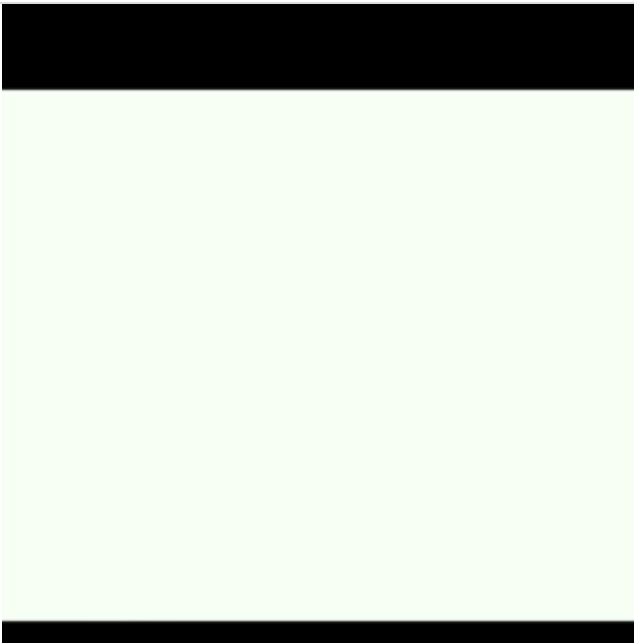
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Furloughed FAA employees picket outside Oklahoma City airport



by **JUSTIN WINGERTER**
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Union members picket outside Will Rogers World Airport on Monday. [Photo by Justin Wingerter, The Oklahoman]

A small contingent of furloughed Federal Aviation Administration employees stood outside Will Rogers World Airport on Monday afternoon to warn travelers of the effects the record-long government shutdown.

“On the very day that a new governor is taking the oath of office, wanting to move Oklahoma forward into a new economic era, Washington, D.C., is throwing him a dead dog, telling him, ‘We’re not going to pay thousands and thousands of your constituents,’” said Dave Spero, an FAA technician and regional vice president for Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, the union that organized the picketing.

Few, if any, economic sectors have been hit harder by the partial government shutdown than aviation, a major employer in the Oklahoma City area. About 1,750 FAA employees in the city have been furloughed or are working without pay. Some contractors at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center also are furloughed and Transportation Security Administration agents at the airport are not being paid.

“I don't think people realize how far this stretches. They just think Washington, D.C., is shut down. Eighty percent of the employees who work for the government don't work in Washington, D.C.,” Spero said.

His union represents hundreds of furloughed employees in Oklahoma City who, when working, are responsible for ensuring maintenance work is conducted and planes are mechanically prepared to fly, among other job duties currently deemed nonessential.

“The airlines are self-regulating right now,” said Kelly McGonigal, a furloughed air traffic systems specialist. “I don't think any airline wants to do anything unsafe, but when you don't have someone checking on you it's a lot easier to cut corners and think, ‘Oh, we'll do it next time.’”

One of several unions

In a statement, the FAA said safety remains its top priority and air traffic controllers “continue to serve their critical mission to ensure the public's safety” during the shutdown. “We sincerely thank FAA employees who are working to keep the traveling public and our skies safe,” the statement said.

The aviation safety union is one of several unions that represents furloughed and unpaid FAA employees in Oklahoma City. Another, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, which represents hundreds of furloughed workers here, began leafleting campaigns at several airports Monday, calling for an end to the partial shutdown. Will Rogers World Airport could be among those leafleted if the union obtains a permit, a union spokesman said.

Picketing aviation safety union members were limited by airport officials Monday, told they must remain on the far end of the drop-off area, unable to enter the airport or approach people. One picketer questioned whether the airport's namesake would agree with such restrictions.

Longest shutdown

Their protest came on the 24th day of a partial government shutdown that seems to have no end in sight, with President Donald Trump and congressional Democrats at loggerheads over border security funds. The shutdown is the longest in American history.

“I am a little surprised in some ways this has gone on as long as it has and I'm ready for it to be over with,” said U.S. Rep. Frank Lucas, a Cheyenne Republican who represents the state's western half, in a phone interview Monday afternoon.

“This is different in that you have two very determined — some people back home might say stubborn — forces at play. You've got the president, who's very determined to fund border security ... but, by the same token, you've got a speaker who's very determined not to provide the money that the president wants.”

Lucas agrees with Trump's focus on border security but says he doesn't have all the answers on what, exactly, should be done to shore up the southern border. He worries that Trump's emphasis on immigration in his 2016 campaign — and, perhaps, his upcoming 2020 campaign — along with House Democrats' opposition to Trump in their successful 2018 campaigns, has made compromise more difficult.

“It is almost as though the White House and the speaker's office are determined to wait and see which way the American public casts blame. Until it's really clear — and I'm not sure, I'm afraid, we're quite at that point yet — then neither of those two strong-willed political forces are willing to back off,” Lucas said.



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