

LOCAL

Federal workers share stories of struggle at union bash

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Uncertainty hung in the air Saturday night as guests filed into the Omni Austin Hotel at Southpark, some wearing evening gowns that draped to the floor and others in their finest suits, for an evening with dinner, music and dancing.

For members of the National Treasury Employees Union Chapter 247, a celebration called Winter Wonderland 2019 was scheduled and paid for months ago — before the partial federal government shutdown that now threatens the financial security of many of its members. Chapter 247, legally obligated to pay the cost of its contract to the hotel, would have lost money if it canceled.

Eddie Walker, president of the chapter that represents about 1,500 IRS employees in Austin, said he hoped that continuing with the event would help lift members' spirits during the shutdown.

"We're trying to do everything to give them a great night out," he said. "They look forward every year to us doing this, but this year is a very tough year. We wanted to bring them in here and let them forget about it a little bit and let them talk to each other about their stories."

Part of the expense of the annual union event is covered by ticket sales, which began just as the shutdown started. Members could attend without paying upfront and could pay the chapter back once their paychecks are received — and only if they can afford to pay.

Anasa Brooks, 61, showed up with her husband, Gene, and 19-year-old daughter, Aatreia, to show support for the union.

Anasa, who has worked with the IRS for 14 years, said her financial situation has become even more difficult now that Gene, a former education professor at the University of Texas, retired this month. She said they are making ends meet with Gene's savings, but they have no other income.

"His retirement hasn't kicked in, and my Social Security and his disability got cut Jan. 1" she said.

"Everything hit at the same time, and it's just been complete and total chaos at my house. You just don't know where to turn and you just keep hoping."

"It's taking its toll the longer the shutdown goes," Gene added. "It creates more stress not just physically but financially. If it goes on for days and months, like the president has threatened, it's going to be devastating."

Anasa said her bank was previously working with her, allowing payments to go through, but won't continue to do so if the shutdown continues. Her account is now more than \$500 overdrawn, she said.

She said she worries for Aatreia, who lives with her and is disabled. Anasa said she has medical needs and requires special care.

The partial government shutdown — the longest in U.S. history and affecting 800,000 federal employees — began Dec. 22, when Congress failed to pass a spending bill to keep the government running. President Donald Trump has said any new spending plan to reopen the government should include billions for a border wall, which Democrats in Congress oppose.

Hours before Winter Wonderland got underway, Trump appeared on television to present a deal to Congress that would grant temporary deportation protection for some immigrants in exchange for \$5.7 billion to fund a border wall. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who has said she wants the government reopened before any immigration deal is struck, quickly rejected Trump's proposal.

"For the president to say we're with him on this, we're not," she said. "We're just regular people. We work paycheck to paycheck. We need to have food. We need to have electricity. It's just not fair."

Jerry Bowers, who has worked with the IRS for 18 years, said she has stayed afloat with money from her last paycheck before the shutdown. She has applied for unemployment compensation, which has yet to kick in.

Bowers is single and has only one income, she said. If she must, she might ask her daughter for money, though she prefers not to.

"It's very disheartening to know we're not at work to do our jobs," she said. "We need to get back to work, so we won't lose our houses. (To) pay our bills and buy groceries."

She said she is grateful for the help she has gotten from the local food bank and other businesses across Austin that are providing meals for federal workers.

Nathan Wheeler, who has been working with the IRS for 18 years, recently started driving for Uber and Lyft to make ends meet while he has been furloughed. He said he drives from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. during the week.

"It's not enough to make up for the paycheck but it's still something at least," he said. "I've been driving nonstop for four weeks, so it's nice to take a break."

He said he and his roommate must now find a new place to live because their hotel will soon be redeveloped. If the shutdown continues, he said he is not sure what to do next.

"It's hard to deal with because we can't pay for anything for a while," he said. "Hopefully the government reopens before the hotel closes up."