

SEPTEMBER 25, 2023

# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:31 P.M. EDT

Q Hey, hey.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Hey, hey.

Q Hi.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Hi, everybody. Look at all the cameras. Oh, my goodness. I'm camera shy.

Okay. Good afternoon, everyone. Happy Monday.

This week, as House Republicans' chaos continues to march us toward an extreme Republican shutdown, we are calling out how a shutdown would damage our communities, economy, and national security.

And we're going to hold extreme House Republicans accountable. We're going to hold them accountable for the reckless cuts they are demanding as a condition — as a condition for keeping the government open.

With that, I'm looking forward to having the Secretary back here again to give you a laydown of the impacts and to talk about what the extreme Republicans — what — what they're about to do is going to really impact families and Americans across the country.

If you think about it, the risk of vital nutrition assistance for nearly 7

million mothers and young children who count on WIC, prevent farmers from being able to access new loans, and delay housing loans for rural families. And that is what they're — we're looking at if this shutdown — this Republican shutdown occurs.

With that, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY VILSACK: Great. Thank you.

Well, good afternoon, everybody. It's certainly a pleasure to be here today. I think most of you probably understand and appreciate that the work of the Department of Agriculture (inaudible) a number of mission areas. We are not only responsible for supporting farmers, we also ensure a stable food supply, and we also provide nutrition assistance — vital nutrition assistance to millions of Americans.

That's why it's so difficult to face where we are today with an extreme House Republican effort to recklessly steer our government towards a preventable shutdown that would put many of the critical services that we care about deeply at USDA at risk.

I know about this firsthand because I was Secretary of Agriculture during 2013 when we had a shutdown, and I remember then the needless challenges and disruption that it caused.

So, today, I thought it would be important to highlight some of the impacts of this extreme Republican shutdown, what impact it would have on rural Americans, farmers, families in need.

Let me start with WIC. WIC is a program that impacts and affects over 50 percent of all the newborns in this country. Nearly 7 million pregnant moms, new mothers, and young children count on WIC every single day to receive support — nutrition assistance support.

With a shutdown, what we would see across the United States is a denial of those benefits and opportunities. In some cases, it would be literally within a matter of days after the shutdown. In some cases, it may be — in some states, it may be literally in a matter of weeks.

But clearly, during the course of a shutdown, millions of those moms, babes, and young children would see a lack of nutrition assistance.

And it's not just the WIC program, as important and significant as that is. It's also about our farm economy.

Now is the time when farmers are harvesting their crops and they're seeking marketing loans, which allow them and assist them in ensuring that they get a decent price for their crop. When we have a shutdown, farm service agency offices in virtually every county of this country shut down and those loans are not available.

It's not just about farm loans. It's about newlyweds who have decided to purchase their first home in a rural small town. Perhaps they're getting a loan guarantee from a bank that is guaranteed by USDA or perhaps they're getting a direct loan from USDA to be able to purchase that home. With a shutdown, those loans don't take place. And it's conceivable in those circumstances not only do they not — are they not able to close the loan, it's also conceivable that they may lose the deal.

So, this is a matter of real consequences when we are faced with a shutdown.

It's not just about rural America. It's also about our natural resources.

As you probably know, the USDA is responsible for maintaining 195 million acres of national forests and grasslands. These are often places where people go to recreate. And when they do, they provide tourism dollars to communities in which they are going and spending time.

When we have a shutdown, those national forests shut down, and they are closed. And so, those family trips don't take place, and those tourism dollars are not spent, and the jobs they support are at risk.

It's not just the services that go to the American public. It's also those who work for USDA.

We anticipate and expect that more than 50,000 of those who work for USDA will be furloughed. And when they're furloughed, it means that they don't receive a paycheck. Because they don't receive that paycheck, their local economies get impacted and affected.

And I could go on for some time. But the reality is that when there is a shutdown, we're looking at a significant disruption of the lives of millions of Americans.

Republicans have called for a CR. And I'll just say two things about that. It just is basically carrying forward the extreme cuts that we've seen and saw in the budget that was proposed in the House Ag appropriations committee.

At the time, I said the budget was pathetic, it was punitive, and it was petty. And I would say that that also continues to be the case.

Not only do we have the WIC initiative that wouldn't be funded, but we're also looking at the failure to fund the firefighter fix, which puts at risk the firefighting staff necessary to combat the nearly 44,000 fires that we've already experienced in the Western U.S. today.

So, I'm here today to suggest that there are real consequences to real people in a real way when there is a shutdown, especially one that ought not to happen. And — and I'm hopeful that, at the end of the day, it doesn't happen.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Thank you, Secretary.

Go ahead.

Q Once there is a shutdown, how long can you keep nutrition assistance going?

SECRETARY VILSACK: To make sure I answer your question, the SNAP program — the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — will continue

—

Q Okay.

SECRETARY VILSACK: — at least for the month of October. Now, if the shutdown were to extend longer than that, there would be some serious consequences to SNAP.

The WIC program that I talked about today, which is for nearly 7 million moms and children — that program expires, if you will, or it stops immediately when the shutdown occurs.

We have a contingency fund at USDA that might continue it for a day or two. Some states may have leftover WIC benefits that have not been spent, which could extend it for a week or so in that state. But the vast majority of WIC participants would see an immediate reduction and elimination of those benefits, which means the nutrition assistance that's provided would not be available.

Q Thank you, sir.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Go ahead, MJ.

Q Is there any scenario where if there is no deal and there is a government shutdown that the administration could explore the possibility of exercising any authority to extend the funding of the WIC program past the one or two days that you just mentioned?

SECRETARY VILSACK: There is no authority. It's — it is — unlike the SNAP program, it doesn't — we don't have that capability, at least for a period of time, with SNAP for — for a month or so.

So, if we have a shutdown, WIC shuts down. And that means the nutrition assistance to those moms and young children shuts down.

Q Thank you. You mentioned a government shutdown could harm farmers and prevent them from accessing new loans. Help us put this into perspective for Americans. At the end of the day, what should Americans expect? Could this even lead to higher food prices, for instance?

SECRETARY VILSACK: What it leads to is a tremendous amount of stress for those farm families. Just to give you a sense of this, many farm families require off-farm income to be able to keep the farm. And oftentimes, they need that loan — that marketing assistance loan — to be able to make sure that they maintain the farm.

So, it puts at risk the small- and mid-sized farming operation in terms of their ability to get credit when they need credit, their ability to pay their bills when they need to pay their bills, the ability to make sure that they can harvest their crop.

If they can't harvest the crop or they don't get the marketing assistance loan, then it's — they're in a situation where they — they don't profit. And if they don't profit, they risk losing the farm.

So, it creates a tremendous amount of stress. For what reason? There's no reason for this shutdown. At the end of the day, we had a deal — a deal that the Senate passed with a majority of senators, a deal that passed the House with a majority of not just Democrats but also Republicans voting for it. A deal is a deal.

And, you know, to me, there's no reason for us to be even having this conversation.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Go ahead, Weijia.

Q Thanks, Karine. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Over the weekend, the President mentioned that food safety was also at stake. So, can you give us some examples of how, during previous shutdowns, the absence of food and environmental inspections impacted public health?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I think you would want to visit with the folks at FDA. You need to understand that our food safety responsibilities are divided. The USDA has responsibility for meat, poultry, and processed eggs. FDA has responsibility for everything else.

I can tell you that in terms of meat, poultry, and processed eggs, we will continue to have food inspection. But that may not necessarily be the case

with the FDA. So, I think you want to talk — talk to the FDA.

To show you how silly this is: If you order a pepperoni pizza, we're guaranteeing the safety of it because there's meat on that pizza. If you order a cheese pizza, you're looking at FDA. (Laughter.)

Q So, are not all food inspectors considered essential workers? Just ones affiliated with meat and —

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I can't speak — I can't speak to what HHS does or what FDA does. That's why I think you should visit with them. But our inspectors will be on- — onsite.

But here's — here's where there is a potential problem. And that is if there is a situation and circumstance that requires lab analysis — well, now, that's a different story.

So, you know, that may impact and affect our ability to detect animal diseases as quickly as we need to, which, in turn, could affect the supply of food.

So, it's complicated, but our food inspectors will be on the job.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: (Inaudible.)

Q On the potential 50,000 furloughed workers, do you know where those workers — what programs those would be impacted on? Do you know who we're looking at right now?

SECRETARY VILSACK: It's across the board. It's every county in the country. We have a presence in every county in the country. So, it's going to impact and affect literally every county in the country.

It's FSA offices. It's rural development offices. It's NRCS conservation employees. It's some of the Forest Service employees. It's a lot of the researchers and people who work for the Agricultural Research Service — ARS.

It's — its administrative staff. You can have people working on the job, but if you don't have the administrative people behind it, the job doesn't get done.

It's incredibly disruptive. Incredibly disruptive.

Q And then, on another deadline in Washington, how confident are you that a new farm bill will be passed by the end of the year? Or is an extension more likely?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I know that — I think that the chair and ranking members of both committees are working hard to get this done.

I would say this: In order for it to get done, it's important for them to understand the importance of using all the tools that would be available for all of the challenges that they face — not just the farm bill, but the budget. When you undercut and underfund the budget as some are proposing, cutting it by as much as, in some cases, 20, 30 percent, you under- — undermine the ability of any farm bill, regardless of whether it's passed or not, to be implemented.

And so, our — our challenge at USDA is to provide technical assistance and help to get them to — to “yes.” And that's what we're doing. We'll continue to work.

And our hope and belief is that the farm community in rural areas need certainty and — and consistency. And we'll do everything we can to make sure that this thing gets passed as quickly as it can. But it's pretty tough to do if there is a shutdown.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Go ahead, Niels.

SECRETARY VILSACK: You can't do it.

Q Thank you, Mr. Secretary. A follow-up on that is: To what extent would a shutdown affect the ability of your leg affairs folks and — and maybe negotiations with the Hill on the farm bill? Could the farm bill reauthorization be delayed because everyone is — is dealing with the



consequences of a shutdown?

SECRETARY VILSACK: So, here is how it works. Some senator or representative has a great idea about how they might be able to solve one of the problems they're trying to solve with farm bill. They call our office for technical assistance. The phone is not going to get answered because no one is there. Why aren't they there? Because we're in a shutdown.

That's why it's so ridiculous for us to even talk about this. We — we need to get — the Speaker needs to do his job. He fought for it. He — you know, he — he negotiated for it. He needs to do the job and get the job done.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: All right. Go ahead, Phil.

Q Thank you. Switching gears to a slightly different topic. Has the Department of Agriculture seen anything in the purchase of farmland by Chinese corporations or Chinese nationals that would suggest a threat to national security or food security? Or are those concerns that we've increasingly been hearing about — are those overblown?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I think there is concern, as there was in the North Dakota circumstance, where the Chinese interest was purchasing a land near a military installation. I think there is legitimate concerns in that space. And I think that's one of the reasons why, you know, we've articulated the need, as a department, to be more engaged in the CFIUS process.

I would also say that I think there is work to be done to give us the tools to be able to do an even better job of ensuring that we know when these transactions take place.

It's complicated. But every county has their county recorder. And on any given day, somebody may walk into that recorder's office and file a deed, and there is no way of knowing precisely whether or not that is a Chinese purchaser.

So, we would — you know, we need to work on how we might be able to

collect the information and be able to analyze that information in a timely way so that we would determine whether or not a threat exists or not.

Q So, it sounds like you're not confident in the current system as it's set up to necessarily monitor?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, it's not that I'm not confident. It's that I think — I think we could be — we could do- — I think we're confident in the job we're doing today, because we are ba- — able to identify circumstances, as was the case in North Dakota.

I think that — if any — of pe- — if folks are looking for a foolproof system so that nothing gets through the cracks, then I think there are ways in which we can be helpful, and — and we can improve that process. Being part of CFIUS, I think, is part of it. Being — being able to collect information in a way that allows us to go a little bit deeper and a little quicker would be helpful as well.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We're going to wr- — we're going to wrap it up. Go ahead.

Q Yeah. How — so how would the shutdown affect programs that are used by farmers like crop insurance? And, you know, as part of the country is under really extreme drought — drought conditions, do you see a need for kind of supplemental funding to come in and help folks, you know, plant their crops?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I think there are certain circumstances where, notwithstanding the fact that we have a pretty good safety net, that there are some types of crops that would need a little bit of additional help. Florida and Georgia, in particular, I think of two states that — where there are significant needs and challenges.

Fortunately, the — the shutdown does not impact and affect crop insurance. But a failure to — to extend the farm bill or get a farm bill done could, which is why we don't want to shut down so they can work on the farm bill to get it done and we don't have the disruption to the WIC program.

The for — firefighters, the for — the farm loans, the home loans — I could go on. I could spend all of — and she would probably want me to do this — (laughter) — to spend all of your time talking about it.

But the point of this is — it's very simple — there are real impacts. There are real impacts to real people on a daily basis when — when Congress and the House and House Republicans don't do their job.

And Americans expect — and this is what drives people crazy outside of Washington: when a deal is not a deal and when the work that you're supposed to do doesn't get done and doesn't get done on time.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Thank you, sir.

SECRETARY VILSACK: Thank you.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Appreciate it. Thank you.

SECRETARY VILSACK: Yeah.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Okay. Just two quick things. I also wanted to say a note of welcome to our new employees starting at the White House today: our new deputy directors of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, Greg Jackson and Rob Wilcox. This is all on the heels, as you all know, of this historic announcement that the President and the Vice President made just on Friday. So, we could not be more thrilled to have them on board here and — and look forward to introducing them to you all very soon as the Office of Gun Violence Prevention gets up and running.

And one last thing before we opening — open it back up for questions. As you all know, today as Jewish communities — Jewish communities in the United States, Israel, and around the world are observing a sacred holiday. So, let me say that the President, the First Lady, and all of us at the White House are extending our best wishes for an easy fast and a meaningful — meaningful Yom Kippur.

And with that, Will, you want to kick us off?

Q Sure. Thank you. I have two things. Why did the White House choose to have the President take his — his latest COVID booster out of public view? Isn't this a time when, you know, given the promotion of boosters and how important they are that the public might want to see the President have one?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah. So, I think you all saw the pr- — the physician's memo — his report on Saturday. So, certainly, if you haven't, you should take a look at it.

So, the President got his vaccination. As you know, he has an incredibly busy schedule. He's got — he got his vaccination as — the earliest moment that he could. And that's what we were able to do — work — that would work in his schedule. So that's what happened last week.

And certainly, we are — as you just laid out in your question, we are certainly engaged in a robust campaign. And it is incredibly important to us that we encourage the public to get vaccinated. That has been the way that we have moved forward when we have moved forward with the — you know, this comprehensive kind of vaccination program that the President put forward from the beginning.

And so, you know, we — it doesn't require a photo op of the President to — to be — to be doing that — with a presidential photo op, to be more clear. So we thought that we needed to get that done, get that on his schedule. We did. And we're going to — doesn't stop us for having a robust engagement with the public to make sure that we get it across — the importance of folks getting their vaccines — not just the updated COVID vaccine, but also RSV, and — and also the flu shot.

Q And the second — second one.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, I'm sorry.

Q Changing topics.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah. Go ahead.

Q Is the White House working on — with the Senate on — on a clean CR? And is there any reason for optimism on that front?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I — look, I'm going to be very clear, as I was on Friday. As Secretary Vilsack was very clear just — even before he walked out of the briefing room, which is: Look, this is something for House Republicans — House Republicans to get done. This is a deal that the President made with — with Republicans back in May. And a deal is a deal, as we've been saying. This is something for them to fix.

And so, they have to — they have to get this done — not because of us, not because — even because of the deal with the President, but because of the American people. We just heard the Secretary of — Secretary of Agriculture lay out what will happen to women and children — 7 million women and children who are part of the WIC program across the country — 7 million — if this shutdown happens.

And this is indeed a Republican shutdown. So, they got to get to it. They got to fix it. And they got to stick to the deal that the President made with them early — earlier in the — in the summer.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: MJ, welcome — welcome back.

Q Thank you. It's good to be back. I know that you got a number of questions about Senator Menendez on Friday. But now that the senator himself has said that he is not going anywhere and given that President Biden is the leader of the Democratic Party, does the President believe that a person who is facing allegations that are as serious as the allegations confronting the senator that there is any place for somebody like Senator Menendez in the Democratic Party?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I'm going to be very clear: This is a serious matter. We see this as a serious matter. I think — and we believe the senator stepping down from his chairmanship was the right thing to do — obviously, the right thing to do.

As it relates to anything else, any decision that he has to make, that's certainly going to be up to him and the Senate leadership to decide.

But, of course, we see this as a serious matter. And I'm just going to leave it there for now.

Q And just — just quickly on the trip to Detroit tomorrow, what changed? Can you give us a sense of what went into the decision for the President to go stand on the picket line and show that kind of solidarity with the workers there?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, as you just laid out, you know, this is something — well, the President is a union guy. Right? You heard him say that many times. He is — he is the most pro-union president in modern times. That is not something that he's given him that — himself that title. That is something that labor unions have given to him, and he wears that very proudly.

And, as you all know, the president of the U- — UAW invited him to — to attend, and he — he accepted.

But, look, this is a president that's made very, very clear that he believes that corporate profits should lead to record UAW — a record UAW contract.

And, you know, before the strike even occurred, he — he made public announcements about this. He spoke to the parties on both sides of this. He has made it very, very clear that he supports union workers; he supports the UAW workers. And tomorrow, what you're going to see is — is historic. Right? This is going to be a historic visit.

And the President is going to continue to show his support, not just from the last couple of years, but as he has been in the public eye — as a senator, as a vice president — his support for — for unions. And — and you've seen this in the last two years, with his pro-union policies — making sure that his pro-union policies are indeed pro-workers.

Q So, should we take from the visit that the President is explicitly taking

the side of the union workers as opposed to the companies?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Well, he has been very clear. Right? He is pro- — pro-UAW; he is pro-workers. You know, that is — that is the — that is the — this president. Right? He has said the middle class was built — the unions built the middle class. This is something that he said over and over again.

He's always been on the side of workers. He believes that there is an opportunity here, and he is encouraged and he is pleased by seeing both sides continue to have that conversation. It is their negotiation to make. Right? This is why he says he believes in collective bargaining. And he believes that this —there could be a win-win agreement here.

But he's always going to stand on the side of workers. Always.

All right, go —

Q So, just to follow up —

Q Oh —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, okay. I'll come to you after, Joey.

Go ahead, Steve.

Q Oh, all right.

Q Did Trump's decision to visit the UAW workers play into your decision to go?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Absolutely not. This is a decision — to visit the picket line was based off his own desire. This is what the President wanted to do to stand — to stand with autoworkers. That's what you're going to see the President do tomorrow.

And — and he — as you — as you all know, Shawn Fain's invitation from last week, he accepted that invitation and was proud — is proud to do so.

Q And secondly, does the President endorse the specific terms of the latest proposal by UAW leadership? Or is there room for further compromise?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I'm not going to get into negotiations from here. This is for the parties to negotiate. We're not going to go — we're not going to speak to what's being put at the table.

What we have said over and over again is that we believe there's an opportunity here for a win-win agreement. We believe with corporate record — corporations having record — you know, making record, you know, deals, there should be a — UAW should have a record contract. And that's what the autoworkers deserve. That's what workers deserve more broadly.

Go ahead, Joey.

Q Yeah, did President Biden reach out to the auto companies before — to notify them that he would be going to join the picket line with UAW?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any readouts of any calls to — that was been made regarding to this as it's related to the companies.

As you know, we have made — we have said many times before the he has — he has spoken to the companies. He's spoken to all parties.

As you know, you have — we have — we have two — two members of — Gene Sperling, a member here of the White House — a White House senior advisor and also, as you know, the Acting Secretary, Julie Su, have been in touch — in regular touch with all parties as they are negotiating this process.

But we are — you know, I don't have anything to read out, except that the President was — was pleased to accept the invite that was given to him, that was provided to him by — by the president of UAW and he is always going to stand by the side of workers.

Q And can you provide some more information on the details of the format of the event? Is he going to be speaking? Is he going to be — what



exactly will he be doing? And where in Wayne County, Michigan, is he going to actually be going?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, we don't have any details — specific details at this time. Look, this is going to be a historic — a historic trip that's going to underscore the President is the most — indeed — most pro-union president in history. And so, that's what you're going to see. He's going to be standing — going to join the picket line, standing in solidarity with the men and women of UAW. That is important for the President, he believes, to do.

And as they continue to fight for a fair — a fair share of the value of — value of — they helped create, if you think about what the — what the record — record — these corporations, kind of, the — the record profits that they've been able to make, you know, they believe and we believe that they are owed a fair share of that.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Karine. Just to clarify: Since President Biden will be making this trip, does this mean he supports the 40 percent pay increase, the 32-hour work week that workers are asking for?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I'm not going to get into the details of what's being negotiated right now — that on the table with — with — certainly, with the parties.

What we're saying is that we support the autoworkers. That's what you're going to see with the President tomorrow — tomorrow. This is a — a historic event, a historic trip. And this continues — continues to show how, indeed, this President is the most pro-union president in history and he stands by the side of workers. This is what you're going to see tomorrow.

Q And, separately, the White House has made it very clear that it's on Republicans to avoid the government shutdown, not on the White House. But our latest polling shows that a higher percentage of Americans would actually blame the shutdown on the President and the Democrats, not on Republicans. Why do you think that is? And should the President be out

there speaking more on this issue?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We're going to be very clear. This is — this is — this will be a Republican shutdown. Right? This is extreme House Republicans who have made it very clear that the chaos that we're seeing in the — in the House, they are marching us towards a government shutdown that shouldn't be happening. This shouldn't be happening.

This is the job of Congress. One of the basic jobs of Congress is to keep the government open.

A deal was made. I mean, I can't speak to your polling, but what I can speak is to the facts. The facts is: A deal is a deal. It is up to them to keep the government open. This is something they can do. They know how to fix this. And it is an extreme — extreme part of the Republican Party that is holding this — holding this because they want to ram through extreme policies. That's going to hurt the American people.

So, we're going to continue to be very clear about this. We've talked today about the food safety. You've heard me talk about education, housing, law enforcement, Meals on Wheels, Head Start. So much more will be affected by — by — will be affected by this if the shutdown — this this Republican shutdown happens.

So, we're going to continue to be very clear about it. And it is — you know, it is something that they can fix, they can fix this.

Q But does it show that the President needs to be messaging more to the public about this?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, look, the President was very clear early this summer when he put this deal together — a bipartisan deal — that two thirds of Republicans voted on. And that's what the American people want to see. We saw that in the midterms. Right? That's what they want. They want to see us continue to work in a bipartisan way. That's what the President did.

Now, we're going to continue to be very clear: This is a deal that they all

agreed upon not too long ago — just a couple of months ago — and now they can't stick to the deal.

So, you know, if we're going to be asked the question, we're going to answer it straightforward. We're going to lay out the facts. But this is for something for Congress to fix.

Go ahead.

Q Hi, Karine.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: You're up front today.

Q Yeah, I am.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Okay.

Q First time in the first seat.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah. (Laughs.)

Q Good to see you.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Good to see you.

Q I want to press you a little bit on what you just said. You said that the President supports the autoworkers. Does that mean that the President is siding with the autoworkers over the auto companies?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: What we're saying is we're not going to get into negotiation, right? This is — when it comes to the negotiation, that is something for the parties to decide on. That is something for them to discuss.

But me saying that the President supports the autoworkers — that's not anything new. When we're talking about a president who is pro- — the most pro-union president in history, it is nothing new for the President to stand by the workers. That is nothing new for the President to say, "I'm

going to stand by the men and women of UAW, make sure that they get their fair share, make sure that they get a win-win agreement here.”

We believe this agreement can be a win-win agreement for all. So — but we’re not going to get into the — we’re not going to litigate the specifics of the negotiations.

Q Following up on that, though, a strike could have potentially huge impacts for the economy. According to NBC News polling, 37 percent of registered voters — just 37 percent approve of the President’s handling of the economy. He’s at a 56 percent disapproval — the highest of his presidency.

And 74 percent of registered voters say they have major or moderate concerns about the President’s age and mental fitness. How troubling is that?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Here’s what we’re going to focus on: We’re going to focus on exactly what you just asked me — right? — with the first question, which is: How do we — how do we continue to support the workers? Right? We’re not going to get into the litigation of — of the negotiations here. But what we’re going to do is continue to show how much this President is working for American families.

You just heard from Secretary here, who laid out what it means if there’s a shutdown and why it is so important for Republicans to keep to their deal. That’s what we’re going to focus on.

You see the Bidenomics. I get it. I get that Americans right now — they’ve been through a lot, right? They’ve been through the pandemic — this global pandemic that we’re coming out of. They have been through what we’ve seen because of Russia — Russia’s war in Ukraine. And we saw inflation spike. We saw — we saw what’s going on with what Americans are feeling every day.

This is why — this is why this President has been so zeroed in, so laser-focused on lowering costs for Americans. And we’ve done that.

And a lot of the — a lot of the policies that the President has put forward are indeed popular. I mean, Bidenomics is — has worked so well that you have Republicans in their own districts, in their own states taking credit for things that the President pushed forward, policies that the President has pushed forward, legislation that they didn't even vote for, if you think about the American Rescue Plan, the Inflation Reduction Act.

So, I get — I get the — I get the polling that you're laying out. I get that. But we — we can't — we can't be focused on that. We also have to be focused on really speaking directly to the American people.

The next three days, you're going to see the President go to three states to do just that.

Q But 37 percent approve?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I hear you. I hear you. But it is — look, our focus is going to be on — on what we can do to continue to deliver for the American people.

Polls are polls — right? — they are going to be all over the place. They are going to — they're going to — you know, they don't tell the whole story, actually. And that is just the way a poll is.

What we're going to focus on is how we can continue to do the job that the President promised that he would do — is make Americans' lives a little bit better, give them that breathing room.

I'm going to go around. I — I know I always forget to call on this side, so I'm going to call on you. Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Karine. You just said the President doesn't want to get into the specifics of the negotiations. But is he perhaps interfering in these negotiations by, you know, visiting the picket line tomorrow?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We're not going to get into — we never get into — you know, into the specifics of negotiations — not in public. We're not going to do that. That is something — and that is something for the parties to decide

on. When it comes to negotiations, we've always been very clear about that.

They are meeting. They are negotiating. And we — we are pleased to see that.

When it comes to the President going to the picket line, he's doing it because he wants to stand in sol- — in solidarity with the workers, which is something that this President continues to do and has done for the past several years is stay — stay on the side of workers.

And you see that. You see that with his policies, and you'll see that tomorrow.

Q And one quick one on COVID. There are a lot of people who are struggling to get appointments. There is confusion about — with insurance companies. Is there some sort of concern at the White House right now that this shift in responsibility to the commercial market from the federal government has not gone as — as smoothly?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, we — so we're certainly aware of consumers having experienced unexpected — at least with insurance — coverage, denials at the point of service. We're aware of that.

HHS, as you know, is working with insurance plans and pharmacies to resolve this quickly.

Look, it's a top priority for this administration to ensure that everyone can access this updated vaccine. And so, HHS is working through that. And so, any k- — any specific additional questions about that, certainly, I would per- — I would refer you to HHS.

But we're taking this very seriously. And HHS is working through that — through that.

Okay, Akayla.

Q In the back, Karine.

Q Thanks, Karine. Moody's warned today that a government shutdown could have a negative impact on the country's credit rating. It's the last major credit grader to assign the U.S. a top rating. Is the President concerned that the political brinksmanship that we've seen this year is hurting the country's reputation, specifically on the economy, on the world stage?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, look, I'm going to leave all of the economic analysis to others. Right? I'm not going to get into it from here.

But we know that — and I've said this already a couple of times — that what we're seeing from Republicans in the House, the — especially the extreme Republicans in the House, what they're going to do, proten- — potentially leading us to a shutdown is going to hurt American people.

And, you know, if you think about it, the 3.5 million jobs that have been created under this president, the under-4 percent unemployment rate, I would not understand — we do not understand why they would put our economy at risk. That's what you're just laying out. Why would Republicans in the House put our economy at risk when we have seen the improvements over the last two years?

So, I'm going to leave the — the ex- — leave it to the experts to speak about the economy and what that looks like.

But, you know, this is a question for them. This is something that does not have to happen. It does not have to happen.

Q And a question on student loans. I know that they're restarting on October 1st, potentially the same day that a government shutdown could start. Is there any consideration of pushing that date back, or is there any guidance that you have for borrowers about what they should expect if workers at the Department of Education won't be available to assist them?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, a couple of things. I do want to lay this out.

So, look, when it comes to student loans, it's obviously a top priority,

especially as we talk about the President's economic plan and giving people a little breathing room, especially on their monthly payments.

So, you know, that's why the President also launched, as you all know, the most affordable repayment plan ever, which is the SAVE Plan.

So, you know, if — if this happens, if Republicans in — in Congress, you know, go down this road of shutting down the government, we anticipate that key activities at Federal Student Aid will continue for a couple of weeks. But, however, if it is a prolonged shutdown lasting more than a few weeks, could substantially disrupt the return to repayment effort and long-term servicing — servicing support for borrowers.

So, the Department of Education will do its best to support borrowers as they co- — as they return to repayment, as we have been saying for the past several months. But an extreme Republican shutdown, if this occurs, could be disruptive.

And just to — maybe more — I think about more than 28 million federal — federal student loan borrowers restate [sic] payments. That is what — restart payments.

So, this is something that does not have to happen. These are political games that we see from the other side of Pennsylvania Avenue, and it does not have to happen. It does not have to happen.

And so, that's how we foresee this — this moving forward.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks. I — I wanted to further understand a little bit the President's trip tomorrow.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah.

Q It seems like by going to stand with workers at a picket line, the President is literally standing with them and the terms that they're seeking in the contract dispute. But when you're asked about some of the specifics



of that, you seem to be saying you guys don't want to get into the specifics of the dispute.

So, is he not standing with them on the terms with which they're trying to negotiate with the —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, to be very clear: He is standing with them to make sure that they get a fair share. That is what he's standing with them on. He is standing with them — and we've said this — that — that they — that we — that they get the record — the record profits mean a record contract for UAW. That is why he's going. That is what he's standing for.

Now, they're going to negotiate what that looks like for them. Right? That's what they're doing right now. That's what collective bargaining is all about. Right? They're going to talk it through what a win-win agreement looks like.

But what we definitely agree on is that they deserve a fair share. Right? They deserve a fair share of — of the value that they helped create. That's what the President is saying.

But the details — the specifics of what that looks like, what makes both sides happy or anything in those nego- — at the negotiation table, that is for them to decide. That is for them to decide.

Q But it seems like he's taking away the past — some past presidents have been an arbiter between two sides that are in conflict. It seems like by going to the picket line, he — he's not an arbiter between the two sides. He's choosing a side by standing —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: But we have said —

Q — with the union workers.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: — we have said over and over again that this is a president that stands with union workers. This is —

Q Right. That's why it's confusing where you're saying —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: How — there is no —

Q — like I — we're not going to —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: It's not — no, no, no.

Q — talk about the terms of the —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I disagree. It is not confusing. What he is saying — and we've been very clear — he stands with union workers. He stands with the workers. He has said and they have said he is the pro- — the most pro-union president in history. And that is what he's doing. He is going to stand in solidarity at the picket line with the workers.

Now, they are — they are at the table. They are at the table trying to figure out what this agreement is going to look like. Right? They are going to decide the specifics of that agreement.

What the President is saying is — and he always says this. This is nothing new. He always says he stands by union workers, and he is going to stand with the men and the women of UAW. That continues to be the case.

Go ahead, Katie,

Q So — I'm sor- —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, my goodness. You're going to ask the same question?

Q But I — I —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I'm not going to change my answer.

Q — too am seeking clar- — it's fine. I'm going to ask again.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: No, feel free.

Q Is he picketing or —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: And I'm going to give you the same answer.

Q — is he visiting the picket line? Is he standing with them? Is he walking in the picket line? What —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: He's going to join — he's going to join the picket line.

Q So, does the White House see any political risk in — in —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: What the President —

Q — doing this?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: What the President understands is that he is — wants to be on the side and is and has been on the side of workers. That is something that he has said over and over and over again.

Q So, when he asked earlier that — if he's siding with the workers over the companies, he is indeed siding —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: He is — he is —

Q — with the workers? Yes.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: — standing with the auto workers. He is standing with the workers.

Q Okay.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: We are not involved in negotiations. That is something for them to decide: what is going to work for the parties that are involved.

Q Okay.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: But he is standing with the auto workers. That's what

the President is doing. He got the invite from the UAW president. He accepted. And he's going to go and do — and do what he has said that he does all the time — right? — which is stand with union — stand with union workers. And what you're going to see is going to be standing with UAW — men and women of the UAW. And that is important to the President.

MS. DALTON: Fifteen minutes.

Q Karine.

Q Karine.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: All right, I just got to go around, guys. I got to go around.

Q Karine, can I follow on that?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah, go ahead.

Q You had said —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I'm trying to call on people I haven't called on yet.

Q You had said earlier that the President had spoken to the companies. Presumably, you meant the automakers. We know he had spoken to them before his trip to India earlier this month. Has he had any more recent —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any —

Q — conversations with them?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any calls to read out.

Q Okay. And —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any calls to read out.

Q And have any of the auto companies asked to meet with him tomorrow

when he's in Michigan? Would he consider that?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I just don't have any — any more details on what the trip is going to look like tomorrow.

Go ahead, Danny.

Q Yeah. On the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, you see thousands of refugees are leaving the territory at the moment. How concerned is — is the President about this? And Armenia has said that this amounts to “ethnic cleansing.” Is that a term that the President would agree with?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, we certainly are — are watching closely the reports. This is something that I would have to refer you to my NSC colleagues to give you any update on.

Certainly, it is concerning. But this is something that they're keeping an eye on closer — closer than we are here. And so, they'll — they'll give you an update specifically.

Go ahead.

Q Karine.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Go ahead.

Q (Inaudible.)

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: No, go ahead.

Q My turn?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Yeah.

Q Thank you, Karine. I just wanted to ask you about the situation of the Southwest border. As we know, some cities are claiming that they are at breaking point with regards to the humanitarian crisis that is ongoing down there. I know that there was an agreement signed with Mexico over the

weekend. I wonder if the administration is in touch with the cities down on the border and if there's any other actions that the White House is considering to address the issue that is taking place down at the border.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I'm going to have to point — point you to the readout from CBP. As you just mentioned, they — they issued a readout of their conversation with the Mexican government over the weekend, so — so — regarding their engagement. So, certainly would have you reach out to them, and they could lay out specifically how that — that engagement went. And also refer you to the readouts more specifically as well.

Q Karine.

Q Can I have a follow-up on that, Karine?

MS. DALTON: We've got to pre-set for —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Okay. Go ahead.

Q Thank you. So, in a recent meeting with the prime minister of South Korea, Xi Jinping expressed his support for resuming annual trilateral summits with China, Japan, and South Korea. I was just wondering if the administration has any comment on that development.

And then, additionally, recently, the Japanese prime minister replaced both foreign and defense ministers. Is there any concern that this could impact the U.S.-ROK-Japan partnership, especially given that it's happening so soon after the trilateral summit —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, I would —

Q — at Camp David?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, to your first — to your first question, I certainly would refer you to Japan and ROK for specifics of their plan for the trilateral cooperation with the PRC, so that is something that I would refer you to.

But we here — certainly, the United States respects the ability of nations to make sovereign decisions in the best interest of their people, just as the United States takes steps to responsibly manage our relationship with the PRC and with our — and also with our other partners and allies.

What was your second question? This is about the — Japan?

Q Yes, recently, the Japanese prime minister replaced both his foreign defense ministers. I was wondering if there was any concern about the — how that could impact the U.S.-ROK-Japan partnership.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: So, first, I would refer you to the government of Japan on any personnel decisions that they've made.

Look, you saw the relationship continue to deepen and grow just a couple of weeks ago now at Camp David, when there was a trilateral summit, which was historic and truly important. And so, we're going to continue to work closely with our Japanese counterparts to han- — enhance that relationship. So, that certainly has not changed.

MS. DALTON: We have to go.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Sorry, we have to go, guys.

MS. DALTON: Got to pre-set.

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: All right, I'll take — go ahead.

Q Thank you, Karine.

(Cross-talk.)

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q Thanks.

Has President Biden had any engagement with House Republicans about the shutdown?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: I don't have any engagements to read out to you. As I said last week, we have OMB Director Shalanda Young, who has been in regular touch with members in Congress. We have had our Legislative Affairs Office, who has been in regular touch. I don't have anything to read out on any — any conversation that the President has had specifically on this.

But as you know, and we say this often, is the President is in regular contact with congressional members on a — on an array of issues.

But, again, when it comes to this — when it comes to this, this is something that they can fix. I mean, when we talk about a Republican shutdown risking the vital nutrition assistance for nearly 7 million mothers and young children who count on WIC, prevent farmers from being able to access new loans, and delay housing loans for rural families. I mean, that is something that the Secretary laid out very well and in detail. And he's been there bef- — been at — been in this place before back in 2013, where he had the same — the same role in the O- — Obama-Biden administration.

This would be devastating for American families. This does not have to happen. A deal is a deal. This is a deal that two thirds of Republicans voted on, and they should move forward. They can fix this.

Q But as you mentioned, the President helped broker this deal, so why doesn't he do something to help —

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: Because he already brokered the deal.

Q — put it into place?

MS. JEAN-PIERRE: But he already brokered the deal. He already brokered the deal.

They voted on it. He brokered the deal. They took it back — McCarthy took it back to the House; they voted on it. It went to the Senate; they voted on it. Two thirds of Republicans voted on it. It's on — it's — this is for them. This is for them to fix. It was already voted on.



So, a deal is a deal. They have to stick to it.

And also, it is one of their number one jobs. Number one jobs. One of their top jobs – right? – is to keep the government open so that American families don't have to suffer.

All right, guys. Thank you.

2:18 P.M. EDT