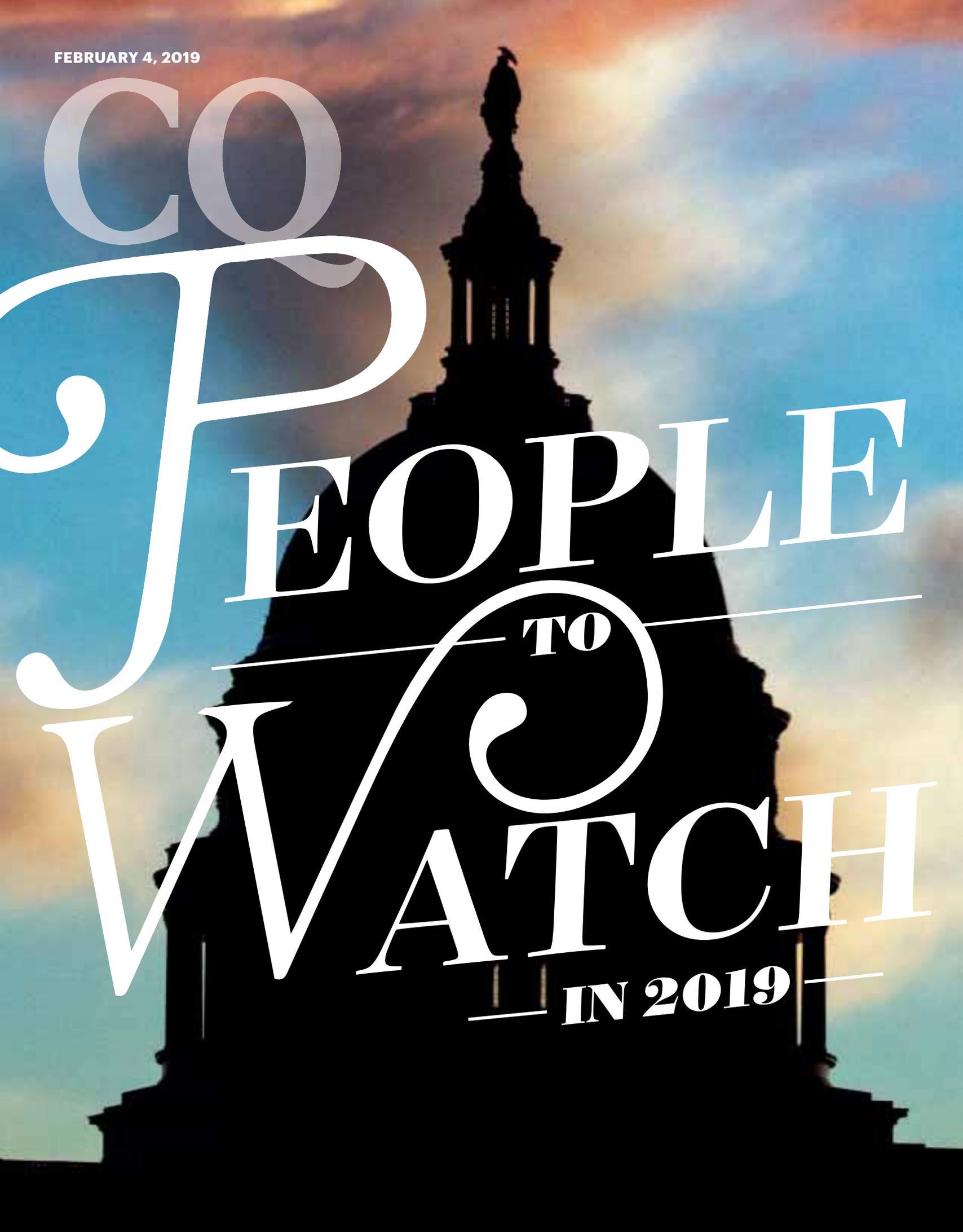


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Territories Squawk About Cockfighting Ban

The five United States territories, stretching from the Caribbean to the South Pacific, have little in common in terms of culture and language. But the sport of cockfighting, and opposition to a recently passed federal ban that will take effect this December, unites their governments and congressional delegates.

Cockfighting, and all other animal fighting, is illegal in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Louisiana was the last state to outlaw animal fighting in 2008, the same year it became a federal felony to sponsor, buy, sell or train an animal for fighting. The 2014 farm bill included a provision that made it a felony to attend an animal fight, with even steeper penalties for bringing a minor.

However, none of these laws applied to the five U.S. territories. Cockfighting continues to be openly practiced and regulated there. It's also a multi-million dollar industry.

But the 2018 farm bill extended the prohibition on animal fighting to them — American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

It was a hard-fought win for animal rights groups.

“In a few iterations of the animal fighting upgrades, we noticed there were carve-outs,”

says Sara Amundson, president of the Humane Society Legislative Fund. “We wanted to ensure that federal law applies to [U.S. territories].”

The territorial delegates in Congress opposed the farm bill provision.

U.S. Virgin Islands Del. Stacey Plaskett, a Democrat, said on the House floor last May that passing the regulation was “pejorative, paternalistic, yes, colonialist and downright wrong.” As non-voting delegates, none was able to vote on the measure.

Both Plaskett and Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner Jennifer González-Colón, who is a Republican, said cockfighting has unique historic and cultural significance to the territories. They also expressed concerns that a ban from Washington would simply drive the sport underground.

Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero also told the Pacific Daily News she will fight the ban.

But advocates for the ban say the tradition of cockfighting, which often involves strapping razor blades to the legs of the birds, does not outweigh the risks to the animals.

“We heard the same thing in Louisiana about Cajun culture with cockfighting,” says Amundson. “The bottom line is this is abject cruelty.”

— David Jordan



Shutdown Workers Could Get More than Backpay

Around 800,000 federal employees received back pay this week to cover what they would have been paid had the government not shut down for 35 days.

It's likely that many of them will, at some point, get something extra for their trouble.

Heidi Burakiewicz, an employment lawyer at Kalijarvi, Chuzi, Newman & Fitch in Washington, is again pursuing a lawsuit under the Federal Labor Standards Act, as she did after the 2013 government shutdown. The federal district court in Washington ruled in 2017 that civil servants who'd joined her prior suit were entitled to be paid minimum wage for any hours they worked during 2013's 16-day shutdown, in addition to the back pay they received after the shutdown ended.

Burakiewicz filed a similar suit on Dec. 31 contending that the government violated the labor standards law again.

Of the 420,000 federal workers who were required to work during the government shutdown, Burakiewicz believes a high percentage of these workers are protected under the act and will therefore be eligible to join her case and receive extra compensation, presuming the 2017 precedent holds.

Burakiewicz's firm recently launched a website to sign up people for her new suit (www.2018governmentshutdown.com). The firm has already received interest from over 10,000 workers from word of mouth alone.

That said, the plaintiffs in the 2017 case, more than 25,000 federal employees, are still waiting to be paid because of the laborious process of calculating damages.

Burakiewicz is optimistic the government will move into the damages calculation process quickly for the 2018 lawsuit now that there is a road map for it. She expects each will get \$1,160 if they worked full-time during the shutdown, more if they put in overtime.

She's also hoping that holding the government accountable will prompt politicians to work harder to avoid future shutdowns.

“I wanted to use the case as a conduit to talk about how shutdowns harm the workers,” Burakiewicz says. “The original plaintiff in 2013 and the original plaintiff in this case, they really want to send the message that there shouldn't be any more shutdowns because it's harming people — every one of my clients, that is what's most important to them.”

— Eleanor Van Buren