

Bush slashes federal workers' pay raise

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With its November 29 executive action slashing pay raises for 1.8 million federal workers, the Bush administration has once again revealed itself to be the political representative of the most rapacious sections of the American corporate and financial elite.

A 1990 law requires across-the-board raises of 3.1 percent for civil service employees as well as a “locality pay” adjustment to compensate for the disparity between federal workers’ pay and that of workers in the private sector. A clause in the law allows the president to declare a “national emergency” in order to withhold the full amount.

While both the House of Representatives and the Senate had proposed a 4.1 percent hike, approximately the same amount the military is to receive, Bush rejected the principal of civilian-military parity, limiting the raise for civilian workers to the 3.1 percent minimum. At the same time he barred any “locality pay” raise.

Workers in more than 30 metropolitan areas will be affected by the locality pay freeze, including New York, Boston, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, Cincinnati, Orlando, Kansas City and Washington DC—cities where the cost of living is particularly high and the disparity between civilian and federal workers’ pay is greatest. By the White House’s own estimates, the overall pay gap between private and government workers nationwide is about 18.6 percent.

Bush’s invocation of a “national emergency” to slash the federal workers’ pay raise was a fraud. He announced his decision without any serious explanation of how cutting workers’ pay would aid the “war on terrorism.” The timing of the announcement—in an email to reporters late Friday on the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, when it was likely to receive minimal press coverage—underscored the contempt for the working class that pervades this extreme right-wing government.

Bush faced little resistance. His cut in the federal pay raise evoked barely a whimper of protest from the Democratic Party and the unions representing federal workers.

Bush claimed the pay increases “would threaten our efforts against terrorism or force deep cuts in discretionary spending or federal employment to stay within budget.” But the same rationale was not applied when it came to rewarding his political cronies. In a decision announced just this week, but implemented earlier this year, Bush restored cash bonuses for several thousand of his political appointees, a practice begun under the first Bush administration and barred under Clinton. These awards can total \$25,000 or higher for senior political appointees, on top of salaries of \$115,000 to \$140,000 a year.

The cutback in the raise for federal workers is the latest in a series of government measures targeting the working class. On October 8 Bush invoked the anti-union Taft-Hartley law against West Coast longshoremen, imposing a “cooling-off” period and banning any type of work action against the shipping companies.

The law establishing the Department of Homeland Security, drawn up by the administration and passed last month with the support of a majority of Democratic lawmakers, will strip 170,000 federal workers of civil service protection and collective bargaining rights. The government will have the unrestricted power to hire, fire and transfer workers in the new department.

In another recent move with devastating implications for federal workers, Bush announced an initiative allowing private companies to compete with federal agencies presently employing nearly half of all federal employees.

Last month the Bush administration refused to broker a compromise between the House and Senate to extend unemployment payments for nearly 1 million jobless

workers who will run out of benefits by the end of the year.

Finally, the White House announced this week that it will repeal a Clinton-era rule that allows states to use unemployment insurance money to help families whose wage-earners take time off to care for a newborn or newly adopted child, a move that could adversely affect as many as 1.9 million working women.

These anti-working class actions take place under conditions of rising unemployment, with massive job cuts announced almost on a daily basis, and growing signs of social distress among broad sections of population. They are an essential component of the general attack on democratic rights carried out by the Bush administration in the wake of September 11, including the secret detention of alleged terror suspects, the indefinite jailing, without trial, of individuals as “enemy combatants,” and mass arrests of Arab and Muslim immigrants.

The latest attack on federal employees demonstrates that the essential target in Bush’s “war on terrorism” is the working class. The extreme-right forces represented by the Bush administration aim to strip working people—citizens and non-citizens alike—of their basic democratic rights and all means of resisting the attacks of the corporate elite.

By contrast, when it comes to big business and the rich, the Bush administration is a source of almost limitless largess. Only a few days before the attack on federal workers’ pay Bush signed into a law a “terrorism insurance” measure that amounts to a huge windfall for the insurance and construction industries. The law guarantees up to \$100 billion in federal funds for the insurance industry in the event of a terrorist attack.

The Homeland Security Act was similarly tailored to corporate interests, with provisions shielding drug companies and arms makers from liability suits.



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