

Sessions sworn in as attorney general as Trump signs orders to increase police powers

Tom Eley
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On Thursday morning, Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions was sworn in as attorney general, with President Donald Trump looking on approvingly, marking the ascendance of an avowed opponent of democratic rights to the office ostensibly tasked with protecting them.

The US Senate confirmed Sessions on Wednesday in a 52-47 vote, with Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia joining Republicans to see the nomination through.

After being sworn in, Sessions said he would direct his offices to end immigrant “lawlessness,” counter “an increased threat from terrorism,” and beat back an alleged growth of violent crime. He described the latter as a “dangerous permanent trend,” though data on violent crime demonstrates that it is at its lowest level in decades.

This is coded language for a major increase in US police powers to target the entire working class. Immediately after Sessions’ swearing-in ceremony, Trump signed three more executive orders directed at further increasing the role of police in US society. The first, Trump said, will “break the back of the criminal cartels that have spread across our nation.” The second creates a task force on violent crime in America. The third calls for the creation of “a plan to stop ... violence against police.”

Sessions will have a major hand in executing these and the many other orders issued from the Trump White House. The attorney general heads the Department of Justice and is both the leading US law enforcement officer and the primary legal counsel to the US government.

These actions follow a speech by Trump before the Major Cities Police Chiefs Association on Wednesday, during which Trump denounced the courts for ruling against his anti-Muslim travel ban. Trump also told the assembled police chiefs that they have a “true friend in the White House.” Every year, police in the United States kill more than 1,000 people, many of them unarmed.

Sessions’ vacated Senate seat was taken Thursday by the attorney general of Alabama, Luther Strange, an appointment made by the state’s Republican governor, Robert Bentley. Two months ago, Strange intervened to

block impeachment proceedings against Bentley. He then petitioned Bentley for Sessions’ senate seat. “The air of corruption is thick,” admitted another Alabama Republican politician, Ed Henry.

One of Sessions’ first tasks will be to defend Trump’s ban on immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim countries ravaged by US imperialism, including Iraq and Syria. Trump last week fired acting attorney general Sally Yates for refusing to defend the travel ban, which breaks up families and blocks students from attending college and workers from taking jobs.

On Thursday night, a US district court upheld a lower-court ruling blocking Trump’s order. Trump responded with a Tweet: “SEE YOU IN COURT, THE SECURITY OF OUR NATION IS AT STAKE!”

As head of the Department of Justice, the US attorney general oversees a number of what are, in effect, national police agencies, among them the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the United States Marshals Service; the Federal Bureau of Prisons; and the Drug Enforcement Administration. These agencies account for about 90,000 of the roughly 113,000 DOJ employees, and consume the lion’s share of its \$27 billion budget.

In addition to these are offices that have occasionally been tasked with defending workers, minorities and the environment from federal law-breaking carried out by corporations and state governments. The best known of these is the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division.

There is considerable historical irony in Session’s elevation to head the agency assigned to protect civil rights, a fact he seemed to acknowledge at his swearing-in. “It’s something I never expected would happen in my life,” he admitted.

Sessions is a longstanding advocate of so-called “states’ rights”—a historical euphemism for the “right” of southern state governments to trample the rights of oppressed sections of their population—first slaves, then sharecroppers, and now workers of all races. The Justice Department, meanwhile,

has at times been tasked with defending the oppressed against such claims to “states’ rights.”

The Department of Justice was created in 1870, under President Ulysses S. Grant, with the express intent of protecting the civil rights of freed slaves and their white allies in the American South after the Civil War. Grant nominated as attorney general former Confederate officer Amos Akerman, who brought more than 3,000 indictments against members of the Ku Klux Klan within two years. Akerman’s removal later in the Grant administration contributed to the end of Reconstruction and the retrenchment of the old slaveholding oligarchy.

Nearly a century later, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, under the pressure of the mass civil rights movement, once again used the Justice Department to enforce federal civil rights legislation and Supreme Court rulings, against the violent opposition of the southern ruling class. In response, leading segregationist politicians, led by Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, abandoned the Democratic Party and went over to the Republican Party. The young Jefferson Beauregard Sessions—who lived in Selma and Montgomery at the time of the civil rights struggles there—followed this exodus, joining the College Republicans at Huntington College around 1965.

Sessions represents a faction of the Southern ruling elite that has never reconciled itself to legal equality for African Americans. He used his career as US Attorney for the Southern District of Alabama from 1981 until 1994, in the words of the Coretta Scott King statement whose reading by Senator Elizabeth Warren was silenced by Senate Republicans, “to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens.” That record helped defeat Sessions’ nomination to US District Court by Ronald Reagan in 1986.

Sessions has not changed in the intervening years. As Alabama Attorney General (1994-1996) and then US senator (1996-2017) he established a reputation that has consistently placed him on the right of the Republican Party. He has invariably advocated for war and militarism, greater police powers, and the untrammelled prerogatives of corporations, and has opposed protections for basic democratic rights for workers, women, minorities, gays and lesbians, and, most vociferously, immigrants. It is this last category that appears to explain Sessions’ gravitation to Trump—the Alabama senator was among the first national Republicans to endorse the real estate tycoon in his bid for the presidency.

If Sessions has not changed, his ascension to attorney general can only be seen as the outcome of the shift rightward of the entire American political establishment, which prefigures still deeper attacks on democratic rights.

Sessions will inherit an office that has long since abandoned any active defense of democratic rights. It is

especially notable that the DOJ under Barack Obama failed to bring federal civil rights charges against a single killer cop in eight years, a span during which numerous such murders were captured on video. And Attorney General Eric Holder, who served under Obama from 2009 until 2015, left behind for Sessions the pseudo-legal rationale for the arrogation by the president of the “right” to assassinate anyone, anywhere, without judicial review—a power that Donald Trump doubtless intends to exercise frequently.

The toolkit Holder leaves for Sessions also includes, as the WSWS previously noted, “persecuting whistleblowers and journalists; targeting protesters and antiwar activists under antiterror laws; asserting unlimited executive powers; justifying government secrecy; deporting immigrants en masse; abetting the expansion of illegal domestic spying; slashing wages and benefits for workers; and infiltrating authoritarian and fascist legal doctrines into American jurisprudence.”

Like their opposition to Trump’s pick for education secretary, Betsy DeVos, Democratic handwringing about Sessions is aimed at dressing up the Democrats as an actual opposition party. In fact, every Trump nominee so far presented has passed through Senate committees and chamber-wide votes, most of them with considerable Democratic support.

As for Warren, she did not defy the gag order imposed on her, and neither did any other Democratic senator. Instead, they immediately seized on invocation of Rule 19 by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to portray the Massachusetts senator as a principled opponent of Trump’s policies.

She is no such thing. Repeatedly, Democratic senators—Warren and Sen. Bernie Sanders included—have stressed their readiness to “work with” the new administration on its central policy thrust—economic nationalism. Their main line of attack on Trump has been from the right—demanding a more warlike stance against Russia.



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