

Trump signs executive order attacking US social programs

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The Trump administration Tuesday initiated an assault on the social programs that serve the country's poorest citizens, ordering departments throughout his cabinet to seek out new ways to gut existing programs and impose onerous work requirements for continuing assistance.

The executive order, titled "Reducing Poverty in America by Promoting Opportunity and Economic Mobility," orders the departments of Treasury, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, and Education to review all public assistance programs with the aim of determining which programs currently have work requirements attached to them. For those programs that lack such requirements the executive order demands that they either be eliminated or consolidated with programs that do, except where forbidden by law.

The order requires the cabinet secretaries of these departments to issue a report within 90 days outlining which programs will be eliminated and what new restrictions will be imposed. Medicaid, food stamps, housing assistance and welfare programs all face being substantially diminished by the president's order. The order also requires the various departments to identify which programs undocumented immigrants may benefit from, so that administrative or legislative action can be taken to prevent them from doing so.

Within the order, Trump lays out nine "principles of economic mobility" for how the order should be implemented. These "principles" consist of various right-wing talking points thinly cloaked in bureaucratic jargon.

These include principle (ii) which reads, "Promote strong social networks as a way of sustainably escaping poverty (including through work and marriage)," which

implies that unemployment and broken families are the cause, rather than the result, of poverty and economic dislocation.

Principle (iv) states in part, "Balance flexibility and accountability both to ensure that State, local, and tribal governments, and other institutions, may tailor their public assistance programs to the unique needs of their communities," or, in plain language, empowering state and municipal governments to impose restrictions on benefits beyond what the federal government is legally capable of implementing.

The final principle, (ix), reads, "Empower the private sector, as well as local communities, to develop and apply locally based solutions to poverty." Or, in other words, allow private interests to administer and profit from whatever social spending remains after the administration has finished cutting.

The opening section of Trump's order is also taken from a familiar script, suggesting that the social programs that millions rely upon have perpetuated poverty (actually, of course, the real grievance of the ultra-right is that these social programs allow the working poor to survive rather than die in the streets).

Section one of the order declares that "many of the programs designed to help families have instead delayed economic independence, perpetuated poverty, and weakened family bonds." It goes on to salute the Clinton administration welfare reform of 1996, as "a step toward eliminating the economic stagnation and social harm that can result from long-term Government dependence," while demanding that similar measures now be applied to other programs for the poor, like food stamps, home heating aid and Medicaid.

The social assistance programs enacted by the US government during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and later during the Johnson administration in the

1960s, were not created to ensure that all Americans would thrive economically, but rather to preserve capitalism and forestall the possibility of social revolution. Those programs, which provided minimal benefits to the most vulnerable members of society, have been continuously eroded by both Democratic and Republican administrations over the course of decades. At the same time, the economy in the US underwent a transformation as the ruling class shifted away from industrial production and toward financial speculation, wiping out millions of jobs and impoverishing broad layers of the US population.

The assertion by Trump that these social programs have prevented millions from escaping poverty is absurd. On the contrary, at the same time that these programs have been steadily diminished the concentration of wealth at the top layers of society has continued to grow dramatically. In 2017, 75 percent of all wealth created went to the top 10 percent of Americans, with the top 1 percent receiving 35.5 percent of this figure. The bottom 50 percent of the population received virtually none of this wealth, a mere 1.1 percent. For those ranked in the bottom 20 percent of the population, the share of new wealth created fell below zero, to negative 0.5 percent. Yet all this wealth was created by human labor.

This process mirrors global trends, wherein the social reforms of the mid-20th century that had resulted in a somewhat more equitable distribution of wealth have been rolled back by capitalist governments around the world, resulting in levels of inequality similar to the early 20th century.

Trump's executive order is not aimed at making these programs more efficient, but rather at eliminating them altogether, as a prelude to the long-planned destruction of Social Security and Medicare. Any further restrictions on existing programs will eliminate whatever effectiveness they have left, as they have already been greatly reduced by previous reforms.

Work requirements are already in place for recipients of aid from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, what little remains of the program commonly known as "welfare." The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or food stamps, provides only a minimal level of assistance to the 44 million Americans enrolled in the program and is subject to constant attacks by both Congress and the

various state legislatures that administer it. Medicaid, which some 70 million Americans rely on for basic medical care, has already been targeted by the Trump administration, with the president issuing an order in January that allowed states to impose work requirements upon participants in the program.

All of these programs have a threshold for eligibility so low that only the very poorest citizens qualify for them. This has created conditions that have allowed the political elite, both Democrat and Republican, to drive a wedge between workers who are eligible for these programs and those who are not, with the ultimate aim of dismantling the social safety net in its entirety so as to ensure the further profitability of US capitalism.

In section II of the order, Trump cites the fact that in 2017 the US spent approximately \$700 billion on social programs. This figure is very close to the official annual amount spent by the US each year arming its military and prosecuting its various wars overseas. Needless to say, the defense budget will not be subject to a similar pruning, as any money saved from cutting social programs will be invested in new military adventures.

The Democratic Party has predictably said nothing about Trump's latest order attacking social programs. Instead, their efforts in the past week have been entirely devoted to pressuring the Trump administration to invade Syria, promoting further censorship of the Internet, and furthering the false narrative that Trump's election was due to "Russian hacking" rather than the collapse of support by workers for the Democratic party.



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