

President Trump signs executive orders attacking federal employees

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President Donald Trump signed a series of executive orders Friday making it easier for federal agencies to discipline and fire employees. The unilateral moves follow the president's vows during the 2016 election to "reduce the federal workforce through attrition" and otherwise shrink the number of government employees to their lowest level in decades.

The orders will give federal managers the power to fire workers alleged to be "struggling" in their performance after "improvement periods" lasting up to a single month. Previously, workers in such a status were given from 60 to 120 days to improve, depending on the agency.

The orders will likewise force government unions to negotiate labor contracts with departments at a faster rate, tie layoffs to performance instead of seniority, charge unions rent for using federal office space, and limit the amount of official time an employee can spend attending to union-related affairs.

"These executive orders make it easier for agencies to remove poor-performing employees and ensure that taxpayer dollars are more efficiently used," stated White House Director of the Domestic Policy Council Andrew Bremberg. Far from the bureaucratic behemoth that conservatives have painted it as, civilian employment within the federal workforce, numbering 2.7 million, has dropped to levels lower than during the 1960s as a result of multiple bipartisan cutbacks over the past quarter century.

The executive orders build upon legislation enacted last June. The Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, passed by Congress in response to numerous scandals at the Department of Veterans Affairs, has led to over 1,600 staff firings, mainly of food service, nursing and housekeeping workers, in the past 11 months,

according to statistics from the American Federation of Government Employees union.

Such policies reflect measures enacted at the state level, including in Indiana, where then-Governor Mike Pence tied employee pay to performance. Far from getting the government to behave more efficiently, the current executive orders will have the effect of continuing the assault on federal workers and draining resources from public agencies already starved of funding.

Trump's legislative efforts were preceded by the Obama administration's 2014 Veterans Choice Act, which limited the amount of time an employee could have to appeal a wrongful firing. According to the Economix blog of the *New York Times*, the Obama administration set a record for the number of government employees laid off during the its first three years.

The attack on federal employees occur as Trump has enacted measures to repeal regulations on major Wall Street finance houses that barred risky speculation which contributed to the 2008 financial collapse, increase rent for low-income families receiving federal aid, and restrict funding to clinics that perform abortions. In each case, the Trump administration has gone after segments of the US population that are the most vulnerable in order to whip up support from the more socially backward layers of his supporters.

"This is more than union busting—it's democracy busting," declared AFGE President J. David Cox, Sr. "These executive orders are a direct assault on the legal rights and protections that Congress has specifically guaranteed to the 2 million public-sector employees across the country who work for the federal government." Despite Cox's fake-militant rhetoric, the AFGE, the largest federal employee union, has

collaborated with both Democratic and Republican administrations, accepting hiring and pay freezes for its members.

The latest efforts to squeeze federal employees come as the Trump administration continues to build up the military, the intelligence agencies and other repressive arms of the federal government. While denouncing federal workers in general, Trump has voiced a far different appraisal of the fascistic thugs who make up the bulk of the workforce of the border security and immigration agencies.

Trump's most recent federal budget includes an increase in funding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement of over \$600 million. Last week, the American Civil Liberties Union released a detailed report showing the widespread abuses of underage immigrants held in detention camps by Customs and Border Patrol agents.

Previously, civilian federal employee wages rose in general parity with military pay. That ended in 2011, when the Obama administration enacted a civilian pay freeze which did not affect the military. Trump re-instituted the pay freeze upon entering office last year.

In February, the Trump administration signed into a law a spending budget of over \$700 billion for the fiscal years of 2018 and 2019. Such largesse caused Military.com to remark at the time, "It's the biggest year-over-year windfall since the budget soared by 26.6 percent, from \$345 billion in 2002 to \$437 billion the year after, when the nation was fighting in Afghanistan, invading Iraq and expanding national defense after the 9/11 attacks."



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