

Confusion, anger grows as Trump-Musk deadline passes for federal workers to justify their jobs or be fired

Tom Hall
24 February 2025

Help build a movement in the working class against Trump! Fill out the form below for information about how to begin building a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.

Confusion and anger are mounting among federal workers following the midnight expiration of a deadline to send an email to justify their jobs. The ultimatum was sent via the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) from the so-called Department of Governmental Efficiency, headed by the fascist billionaire Elon Musk, demanding every federal worker explain “what they got done last week. Failure to respond will be taken as a resignation.”

The move is the next step in the Trump government’s campaign to slash hundreds of thousands of federal jobs and destroy whole federal programs on which tens of millions of people rely.

Adding to the chaos were conflicting signals sent from the Trump administration Monday afternoon. Musk barked on Monday morning that “Those who do not take this email seriously will soon be furthering their career elsewhere.” In remarks to the press in the Oval Office afterwards, Trump suggested that those who did not reply could be “fired or semi-fired,” without explaining what “semi-fired” could possibly mean.

This was immediately contradicted by a notice from the OPM calling the responses “voluntary.” But the memo then contradicted itself by declaring that workers should follow guidance from management in their respective agencies. Many, such as the Department of Education, have sent directives ordering workers to reply to the email.

Several departments in the military-intelligence apparatus, including the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice, sent directives to workers ordering them not to reply, citing the sensitive nature of their staff’s work and already existing internal review protocols. This was presented in the corporate press as signs of growing divisions within the Trump administration.

But the military-intelligence apparatus is virtually the only portion of the government which Trump seeks to massively expand. He is seeking to establish a dictatorship, ripping up the Constitution and converting the United States into an armed camp, to suppress the “enemy within,” i.e., the working class, and prepare for new and catastrophic wars.

Nevertheless, signs indicate that Musk and Trump plan to move extremely quickly and brutally. NBC News reported yesterday that Musk is planning on using artificial intelligence to analyze responses, effectively farming out to computer programs decisions that will impact the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of federal workers and

tens of millions who rely on programs under threat.

Given these circumstances, it is entirely possible that the conflicting messages Monday were a deliberate attempt at entrapment by the Trump White House.

“There’s a mix of responses, a lot of anger, confusion, defiance, and worry,” one federal employee told the WWSW. “However, everyone is very aware that this is a provocation aimed at demoralizing us. We won’t let it work.

“A lot of the discussion today has been focused on the uncertainty about whether and how to respond to the email. We got a mass email from the head of our agency early this afternoon instructing us to respond, while other agencies were told not to. But even after the notification, everyone was still confused about whether it was mandatory, given reports that OPM admitted responses are voluntary.

“This afternoon we were discussing what the best approach would be, what information would be the least useful to the AI chat bots and Musk’s minions at DOGE who may use the responses to go after us.

“At the same time, with every new indignity, it’s becoming more urgent that we put an end to this before it’s too late. It’s not going to stop until we make it stop.”

An article in Bloomberg News Monday described scenes of chaos throughout the federal workforce, with workers being locked out of their offices with their belongings still inside and email glitches at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) preventing it from informing workers they had been fired.

A Bloomberg analysis of more than 30,000 cuts found the agencies with the largest number affected included USAID (9,710), IRS (6,700), and the departments of Agriculture (3,400), Health and Human Services (2,300) and the Interior (2,300).

Fox News reported yesterday a major “reduction in force” underway at the General Services Administration, an agency with 12,000 workers, which provides services critical to the function of other federal agencies.

In a naked conflict of interest, DOGE is also targeting the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), which has culled 4 percent of its staff. As *USA Today* noted, the NHTSA has several investigations open into Tesla, in particular the so-called “self-driving” feature on its cars which has been implicated in many wrecks.

Economists have suggested the scale of the cuts could have

significant impacts on the US economy and provoke local recessions in Washington D.C. and other areas with large numbers of federal workers. The layoffs will also have a knock-on effect on federal contractors, who together with direct employees comprise 5 million people.

Nevertheless, the cuts are being given the green light from Wall Street. JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon backed DOGE and Elon Musk in comments Monday, denouncing the federal workforce as “inefficient” and declaring that he is “hoping [the layoffs] are quite successful.”

For the corporate oligarchy, government “waste” means anything that does not contribute either to enriching themselves or defending their interests from opposition from below. “Efficiency” means destroying programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, eliminating whatever piecemeal corporate regulations exist and selling off as many government assets as possible.

In particular, Trump aims to take personal control of the US Postal Service (USPS), the first step in its privatization.

There are massive parallel layoffs underway in the private sector. On Monday, Starbucks announced it would eliminate 1,100 corporate jobs, while Joann Fabrics announced it would close all 800 stores after failing to find a buyer during bankruptcy proceedings. Boeing also announced additional layoffs in Alabama and South Carolina, on top of the 5,000 cuts it has already announced.

According to monthly figures compiled by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, last month US automakers announced 4,549 layoffs, around double both from the prior month and year-on-year. Meanwhile, Ford, with the full backing of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, is conducting police raids in its plants to intimidate workers.

Signs of opposition are growing following nationwide protests last week. National Park Service employees flew an inverted US flag at Yosemite National Park yesterday in protest against massive cuts to the agency. A class action lawsuit by federal workers was also filed yesterday. But this runs up against the fact that the Supreme Court is packed with Trump supporters, and Trump is simply violating the law and court orders at will.

The only means of stopping this rampage is through mass action by the working class, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees explained in a statement yesterday. “The IWA-RFC calls on federal workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to lead this fight. Mass meetings and demonstrations should be called to prepare emergency strike action to stop the firings and the gutting of essential programs.”

This movement requires a rebellion against the capitulation by the union bureaucrats, who are enabling Trump by trying to limit workers to letter-writing campaigns, lawsuits and complaints to federal boards which are themselves being gutted.

On Sunday, the IWA-RFC and the US Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee held a meeting with 150 workers and their supporters to begin building such a movement. At the end, attendees voted nearly unanimously to approve a resolution, which read:

1. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees condemns the mass purge of federal workers by the Trump administration and Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and calls for the mass mobilization of federal employees, including mass meetings,

demonstrations and collective strike action, to stop it. Hundreds of thousands of workers across federal agencies face immediate termination, in flagrant violation of contracts and civil service protections. The destruction of federal jobs is part of a broader corporate drive to gut public services and strip workers of all protections, including the assault on postal workers and the plans for privatization of the postal service.

2. This attack goes beyond Reagan’s 1981 PATCO firings, which destroyed 11,000 jobs and marked the beginning of decades of union-busting. Now, the scale is even greater. Any federal agencies that provide social services or regulate corporations are being hollowed out or destroyed. The USPS, already targeted for privatization, is next. If these firings proceed, it will mean the elimination of social programs and mass job losses across the public sector. This will encourage state and local officials and private employers to escalate their attack on jobs and rights of workers.

3. This meeting condemns the cowardice and complicity of the trade union bureaucracy, which has proposed no action to oppose this historic assault on the working class. The AFL-CIO has limited itself to appeals to the media and the Democrats. AFGE merely promises to challenge “unlawful terminations.” This is not a legal issue—it is a political war on the working class. If the union leadership will not fight this, they will fight nothing.

4. The time for empty statements is over. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee call for immediate preparations for mass resistance, up to and including strike action. Postal workers must join with federal workers, logistics workers, and all workers to stop this purge. We reject the dismantling of public services and demand workers’ control over critical sectors like the USPS. The only way forward is through the independent organization of the working class, in opposition to both corporate-backed parties and their enforcers in the trade union apparatus.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact