

Trump ends collective bargaining for 370,000 federal workers

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The Trump administration announced last week it was terminating collective bargaining at two federal agencies, Veterans Affairs and the Environmental Protection Agency, effective immediately.

With approximately 370,000 workers directly affected, the move is among the largest assaults on collective bargaining rights ever carried out. Beyond striking a blow at a trade union apparatus that nominally opposed him, Trump seeks to facilitate the purge of the federal workforce, remaking the civil service into one where loyalty to the president is a condition of employment.

The elimination of collective bargaining at the two agencies is just a start. Trump targeted more than a dozen additional cabinet-level and independent agencies in an executive order issued in March. In all, the administration aims to remove collective bargaining for around one million federal workers, or about 1 out of every 15 workers covered by a union contract currently in the United States.

Already, 158,000 workers have left the government in the first six months of Trump's presidency, according to an analysis by the Partnership for Public Service. These job losses occurred in advance of a court order last month lifting a temporary freeze on layoffs and agency restructuring. Many agencies also have ongoing programs to coerce workers into early retirements or resignations.

The federal cuts are likely to continue well into next year. President Trump's budget proposal for fiscal year 2026, beginning in October, calls for another 100,000 job cuts. While the president's budget proposal is unlikely to be implemented as-is, it gives an indication of the extent of job cuts that will be pursued.

The ability for the administration to carry out the effort was cleared by a federal appeals court, which on

August 1 lifted a preliminary injunction that had frozen the administration's efforts. This decision in the Ninth Circuit was another in a series of rulings by federal courts rubber-stamping the Trump administration's anti-democratic attempts to reconstruct the federal government, including Supreme Court decisions last month that allowed the disbanding of the Department of Education and mass layoffs without Congressional authorization.

In moving forward with eliminating collective bargaining, the Trump administration is reneging on its assurances it made in court and contradicting guidance issued by the Office of Personnel Management that it would not formally terminate union contracts until the conclusion of litigation.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and other federal union bureaucracies responded by reasserting their strategy of confining opposition to appeals to the courts and Congress. AFGE National President Everett Kelley said in a statement, "While we assess this order's impact and our next steps in these preliminary injunction proceedings, we remain fully committed to fighting this case on the merits and are confident in our ability to ultimately prevail."

AFL-CIO Liz Shuler vowed to "fight this all-out assault on workers with everything we have," while doing nothing to mobilize its millions of members, let alone make most of them aware of the scale and significance of the attack.

The union apparatus's strategy is to appeal to the ruling class and provide reassurances that it is a reliable ally against the workers. Far from encouraging workers to mount a struggle against it, they actively seek to prevent the working class from exerting its power.

Trump, however, is not relenting. By eliminating

collective bargaining for federal workers, he is seeking to make an example of them. Trump has invoked a bogus “national security” justification, even where agency functions have no clear connections, and where employees’ official position descriptions explicitly state they have no national security functions. Such a move sets a precedent that could be extended to workers across sectors, including in private industry.

The aim is to create conditions where any expression of opposition can be grounds for dismissal. The Trump administration has already unilaterally overridden much of what is contained within labor contracts, including telework, flexible work schedules, and union dues collection. Federal unions do not bargain over wages, which are set by Congress. What remains are provisions providing limited job security protections, including against arbitrary discipline and dismissal.

It is significant that the EPA is among the first targets. At the end of June, EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin retaliated against 160 employees for signing a letter critical of Zeldin’s attempt to sabotage the agency’s mission to protect human health and the environment. He placed the workers on administrative leave while initiating a disciplinary investigation. The workers remain on leave at least through August 15, a deadline that has already been extended twice.

Meanwhile, Trump is pushing ahead with new job classifications and hiring criteria that will enable him to politicize much of the nominally non-political civil service. Trump’s Office of Personnel Management has proposed a rule to convert potentially tens of thousands of jobs into a new category of at-will employees whose employment is dependent upon the preferences of the president. It is also revising the employee performance evaluation system. It’s notable that the administration falsely used the charge of poor performance to implement the mass firing of probationary employees earlier this year.

Trump is also revamping the hiring process to ensure that only the most “patriotic Americans are hired to the Federal service” and prioritizing those “passionate about the ideals of our American republic.” Under conditions where Trump has denounced political opponents as traitors, these are clearly coded references in an attempt to fill the civil service with right-wing ideologues.



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