

Trump administration victimizes federal worker for press appearance during shutdown

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The Trump administration is moving to fire a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employee who spoke to the press about the impact of the government shutdown on federal workers and benefit recipients. The blatantly illegal act of retaliation for exercising the right to free speech is part of the Trump administration's efforts to dismantle democratic rights and purge the federal civil service of anyone who poses an obstacle.

Ellen Mei, a program specialist at the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which administers SNAP, WIC and vital food aid programs, appeared on MSNBC on October 2, just a day after the longest partial shutdown in US history began. The interviewer clearly stated at the onset that Mei was speaking in a personal capacity and as a chapter leader of the National Treasury Employees Union, not on behalf of the agency.

Asked about how she and her colleagues were feeling after being furloughed during the shutdown, Mei responded, "My coworkers and I are feeling really conflicted in this moment. So many of us have been overworked and exhausted since April, when we lost half of the staff in our office. So we feel guilty for seeing this as a reprieve because what we really want to do is to be at work helping the people who rely on SNAP and WIC to feed their families and to put food on their tables. We're feeling angry at being treated like political pawns again so that billionaires can have more money while the people that we serve are being, you know, strained even further and having to worry again about their benefits being at play."

Mei went on to discuss the anxiety felt by many federal workers, whom Trump targeted with layoffs during the shutdown, and the uncertainty over the

devastating impacts that would be felt if, as ultimately happened, food aid was delayed to the millions who depend upon it.

The mere act of giving voice to this undeniable social reality was sufficient for the Trump administration to issue a notice to Mei the following day that she would be fired 30 days after the shutdown ended. She is now on administrative leave and has until early December to appeal her firing.

The Trump administration's reaction is indicative of a deeply unpopular regime, highly sensitive to any expression of opposition and determined to suppress it. During the course of the shutdown, millions of people took to the streets in the largest demonstrations in US history under the banner of "No Kings." The elections this month were a rout for Trump and the Republicans. Yet Trump's biggest strength is the collaborationist Democratic Party, which quickly moved after their electoral victory to provide Trump a lifeline and end the shutdown on his terms.

Mei is not the only federal worker who has been targeted for speaking out publicly. In September, 15 Environmental Protection Agency employees were fired for signing on to an open letter that warned of the consequences of the Trump administration's attempt to sabotage the agency's mission to protect human health and the environment. Other signatories were suspended without pay for two weeks.

The victimization of federal workers underscores the criminality of the Trump administration and the entire social class it represents. Trump's withholding of food stamps during the shutdown was itself a historic social crime, using hunger as a weapon in political warfare. But it comes atop the systematic violation of

constitutional norms, including the deployment of troops to US cities and unleashing ICE agents to disappear immigrants.

Meanwhile, federal agencies are being transformed into open instruments of political warfare. Several agencies, including the USDA, dropped all pretense of impartial administration of congressionally-authorized programs during the shutdown, posting messages on their official websites denouncing “Radical Left Democrats.”

Since January, Trump has also moved to cripple or completely dismantle entire federal agencies that oversee social services and constrain capitalist exploitation. Trump’s “One Big Beautiful Bill,” passed over token opposition by the Democratic Party this summer, takes aim at Medicaid, one of the main entitlement programs targeted by the ruling oligarchy for dismemberment, with approximately \$1 trillion in cuts over the next decade. Meanwhile, entire agencies are being gutted. Most recently, on Tuesday, Trump announced the next steps in the shutting down of the Department of Education, after having already halved its workforce of more than 4,000 employees.

The destruction of jobs alongside the shuttering of agencies has been immense. All told, more than 200,000 federal workers have been laid off or compelled into resignation or retirement so far this year, with many more threatened.

Earlier this year, Trump signed an executive order aimed at removing collective bargaining rights for a large swath of federal workers, amounting to the largest union-busting action in US history. As of September, nine agencies had unilaterally terminated contracts covering 445,000 workers. It is notable that, faced with an attack on its very survival, the bureaucrats at the American Federation of Government Employees, the largest federal union, sided with Trump during the shutdown, backing the president’s call for a clean continuing resolution.

A clean continuing resolution (CR) is a legislative measure that allows the government to continue operating without any additional policy changes or controversial provisions, ensuring funding at current levels.

The victimization of Mei and others like her is an issue for the entire working class, with core principles of free speech and democratic rights at stake. There

must be no illusions that these rights can be defended through the mechanism of the unions and appeals to the Democratic Party. To defend jobs, social programs and democratic rights, workers must take the initiative.



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