

Trump attacks National Institutes of Health researchers' union in latest assault against federal workers and science

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The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has launched a frontal attack on the recently formed union of research fellows at its campuses. On Monday, March 2, the NIH leadership announced it will no longer recognize NIH Fellows United–UAW and will seek to have the bargaining unit decertified.

According to reporting by NOTUS (News of the United States) and subsequent coverage, NIH leaders informed the union that fellows “should never have been certified,” claiming that trainees in the affected programs are not “employees” under federal labor law and therefore lack the right to organize.

The United Auto Workers-aligned NIH Fellows United union was formed in late 2023 in response to chronically low pay, precarious appointments and lack of voice over working conditions for early-career scientists. With 5,375 members, it is one of the largest federal government unions to have formed in more than a decade.

The move reprises similar objections the NIH leadership raised in 2023 as the union was being formed. In fact, NIH fellows conduct experiments, write papers and carry out large portions of the day-to-day research on which the agency’s scientific output depends. To claim that these workers, whose productivity NIH relies on for billions of dollars in grants and prestige, are not “employees” is an attempt to turn back the clock on the most elementary rights of the scientific workforce. The Federal Labor Relations Authority subsequently confirmed their status as employees when it recognized the workers’ right to collectively bargain in 2023.

Union representatives have condemned the move as an illegal voiding of the existing contract and have pledged to fight it. NIH Fellows United and the UAW apparatus have said they are “moving on every available front—legal, political, and most importantly, through the organized power of our membership—to defend our rights.” In practice, however, the UAW apparatus has limited itself to statements and legalistic appeals and has opposed any serious mobilization of the working class to defend the NIH fellows.

In fact, UAW President Shawn Fain and the rest of the union apparatus have done everything possible to shore up the “home

front” for Trump as the fascist cabal in the White House launches its illegal war against Iran. Fain has issued no statements opposing the slaughter of Iranian people. At the same time, the UAW bureaucracy has ignored the overwhelming vote for a strike by 40,000 University of California academic workers and kept them on the job nearly two weeks after the expiration of their contract.

Fain has also backed Trump’s illegal tariffs, promoting the lie that this warmonger whose ICE and CBP agents murdered Renée Good and Alex Pretti in the streets of Minneapolis is somehow a champion of American workers. This is to say nothing of the UAW bureaucrats’ decades-long collaboration with the auto companies to impose wage concessions, contracts facilitating layoffs, the erosion of protections and rampant abuse of workers.

Responding to the attack on NIH workers, Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and a socialist who is currently running against Fain for UAW president, issued the following statement:

The domestic counterpart of Trump’s illegal war against the Iranian people is an intensifying war on workers’ living standards at home—through layoffs, austerity and the destruction of basic democratic rights. The union-busting attack on the NIH fellows’ union is one expression of Trump’s war against the “enemy within,” that is, the working class.

It is also part of the ongoing war against science, overseen by Trump’s quack-in-chief Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is systematically dismantling public health protections, including vaccinations, even as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the population, and there are new outbreaks of measles and other diseases.

I call on all UAW members and all workers to rally to the defense of the NIH workers and build rank-and-file committees at federal government and other workplaces to prepare collective action, including a general strike, to defend the jobs and rights of all workers, including

the right to organize.

The Trump administration has already gutted the collective bargaining rights of workers at the Veterans Administration and other government agencies as part of its plans to privatize federal agencies and purge the civil service of any worker not loyal to the fascist regime.

NIH workers cannot wait for the UAW bureaucracy to take action. If Fain and the UAW apparatus raise this issue at all, it is only from the standpoint of defending their flow of dues money and institutional positions. The last thing the UAW bureaucracy wants is an all-out fight against Trump and his Democratic Party enablers because this would undermine the governmental support it receives in exchange for policing the working class.

But an all-out fight is exactly what is needed to defend our jobs, public health and democratic rights. It is the only way to stop the ever-expanding war in the Middle East and the war against the working class at home.

The attack on NIH Fellows United is part of the Trump administration's offensive against federal workers. In August 2025, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced the termination of collective bargaining agreements for most bargaining unit employees, including some 16,000 nurses represented by National Nurses United at 23 facilities. That move was denounced by nurses as a blatant attempt to bust unions and silence opposition to the dismantling and privatization of the VA.

Similar measures have targeted other federal bargaining units, and Trump is now moving to gut protections across the civil service through regulatory changes. On March 5, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) unveiled a proposed rule to "streamline" federal layoffs by prioritizing performance evaluations over seniority in reduction-in-force (RIF) procedures.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the largest federal workers' union, has already warned that the performance review system is routinely manipulated to cap the number of employees who receive high rankings, turning "merit" into a weapon to target whistleblowers and opponents of administration policy.

This follows the implementation of Trump's revived "Schedule F" scheme, under which potentially large numbers of civil servants are being stripped of job protections and converted into at-will employees subject to dismissal for political reasons.

At the same time, the administration is trying to refashion the federal bureaucracy into a nakedly ideological instrument of the far right. The *Washington Post* reported how senior White House officials, including Trump's fascist Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, are directly involved in reshaping the

agency to prioritize hiring young, politically vetted loyalists. Job postings now openly demand alignment with Trump's agenda, including an immigration services position rebranded as "Homeland Defender" that calls on applicants to "protect your homeland and defend your culture."

Administration officials have boasted that there are "opportunities to reshape" agencies this year through staff reductions and selective hiring. The combined effect is to intimidate existing workers, purge dissenters and repopulate the state apparatus with political operatives.

In this context, NIH's claim that fellows are not "employees" acquires its full political meaning. It is an attempt to carve out a large, strategically important layer of scientists from labor protections so that they can be more easily controlled, exploited and disciplined. That the target is a group of early career researchers, many of them immigrants and international scholars, is no accident.

The assault on the NIH Fellows United is also bound up with the Trump administration's broader war on science. NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya is a right-wing ideologue who became prominent during the pandemic as a promoter of "herd immunity" policies and as a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration.

That document, embraced by the Trump White House and sections of the ruling class, advocated allowing the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 among the general population while supposedly "shielding" the vulnerable, a policy that epidemiologists and public health experts condemned as unworkable and murderous. The *World Socialist Web Site* accurately characterized the Great Barrington Declaration as a "manifesto of death," noting that it amounted to a statement of intent by the ruling class to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives in the name of keeping profits flowing.

The attempt to break the NIH fellows' union represents a new stage in the Trump administration's attack on scientific truth and its embrace of mass infection, climate denial and the subordination of research to nationalist and corporate imperatives. By stripping fellows of the right to organize and subjecting them to arbitrary managerial power, the NIH leadership seeks to create a more compliant, intimidated and disposable layer of scientists.

The attack on the NIH Fellows United gives new meaning to the WSWS's previous statements declaring that "the fight to defend science and public health ... is a fight against capitalism and for the political mobilization of the international working class on a socialist program."



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