

Fired drinking water adviser files suit against EPA

James Brewer
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Michigan water expert Elin Warn Betanzo, who played a key role in exposing the Flint water crisis, announced on June 22 that she was filing a complaint against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for her illegal dismissal from its National Drinking Water Advisory Council. “Today I am continuing my fight for safe water by suing the Trump administration for violating my First Amendment right to free speech,” she stated. “The administration fired me and my EPA colleagues to scare public servants into silence. I’ve fought for safe drinking water before, and I will not be intimidated.”

One year ago, on June 30, 2025, Betanzo, along with hundreds of EPA employees, signed a public “declaration of dissent” in protest of sweeping attacks on environmental protections.

In response, the Trump administration announced a “zero-tolerance policy for career bureaucrats unlawfully undermining, sabotaging and undercutting the administration’s agenda.” An investigation was launched to identify the signatories, including those who signed anonymously. Some 140 employees who signed by name were placed on administrative leave in early July 2025. By the end of the summer, most had been cleared, issued letters of reprimand or suspended without pay for two weeks, while at least 15 were fired outright, including probationary employees.

According to an analysis by Inside Climate News, more than 4,000 EPA employees were axed in the first year of the second Trump administration, bringing the total to 12,849, the lowest number of staff at the EPA since the Reagan administration.

Many of those thousands took early retirement. Miguel Del Toral, a retired EPA Region 5 drinking water regulations manager, described it this way in a September 2025 WSWs interview:

I will tell you things are going off the cliff. I know so many people that said, “you know what? ... I could retire right now. I don’t want to deal with this guy for four years.” And they just left.

The methodology of the assault on the EPA and all public services was prepared well in advance of the 2024 elections under the imprimatur of Project 2025. The right-wing Heritage Foundation produced the 900-page document with significant input from leading figures in Trump’s coterie.

These included Jeffrey Clark, the former assistant attorney general, who tried to help Trump overturn the 2020 election; Stephen Miller, the first-term White House aide, who devised family separation and founded America First Legal to vet appointees for their willingness to defy the Constitution; Russell Vought, now Trump’s budget director, who authored Project 2025’s plan to place independent agencies under direct presidential control; and John McEntee, the former personnel director, who compiled the database of pre-vetted loyalists to replace fired civil servants.

Anchored in the right-wing “unitary executive” theory of unchecked presidential power, Project 2025 aims to usurp congressional control over the budget in order to “deconstruct the Administrative State,” i.e., to destroy agencies created by acts of Congress and enforce personal loyalty of government employees to the president.

The WSWs reported on last fall’s government shutdown:

Trump announced in a social media post that he would meet with Office of Management and Budget Director Russ Vought, “he of PROJECT 2025 Fame,” to determine “which of the many

Democrat Agencies, most of which are a political SCAM, he recommends to be cut, and whether or not those cuts will be temporary or permanent. I can't believe the Radical Left Democrats gave me this unprecedented opportunity."

The "declaration of dissent" was hosted by Stand Up for Science. Calling itself a "grassroots organization," it planned coordinated protest demonstrations on March 7, 2025 and March 7, 2026. Its stated purpose is "building the political machinery to fight for science and take back Congress." In plain English, its objective is to mobilize opposition to Trump's fascist agenda behind the Democratic Party.

The document itself is framed in the most collegial of terms, professing a shared commitment to the environment with Trump's then newly appointed flunky, Lee Zeldin. Zeldin served 22 years in the Army as a military intelligence officer and prosecutor, then spent eight years in Congress as a staunch Trump supporter before being named EPA administrator. He has zero expertise in or concern about environmental science, serving only as a loyal pawn of Trump and the oligarchy he represents.

On its face, the Declaration of Dissent outlines "Five Primary Concerns" that are, of course, valid. But in the year since the letter was made public, not a single firing has been reversed. On June 23, a group of 21 Democratic senators signed a toothless letter to Zeldin, calling on him to "reverse course."

Betanzo's suit and the parallel challenges by fired EPA workers before the Merit Systems Protection Board are a reminder that nothing has been resolved. She stated:

I'm challenging one of the largest sweeping, unconstitutional actions against federal employees in modern history. The Trump EPA is using their zero tolerance policy to intimidate EPA scientists from doing their jobs to protect Americans. So this is my story, but it's also the story of many others.

That is the case. On June 29, however, the Supreme Court ruled in *Trump v. Slaughter* that the president has absolute authority over all agencies of the executive branch, including those established by Congress with limited independence, exempting only the Federal

Reserve. The 6-3 decision, which overturned 90 years of precedent to ratify Trump's firing without cause of a Federal Trade Commission member, casts a long shadow over Betanzo's bid for reinstatement and the appeals of the fired EPA workers. Their First Amendment claims are still being litigated, but these basic democratic questions go far beyond partisan political disputes.

In a statement titled "The defense of science requires a fight for socialism!", distributed at the March 2025 Stand Up for Science demonstrations, the Socialist Equality Party wrote:

The fight for science and human progress can only take place through the building of a socialist movement in the working class. Scientists are experiencing the same process of proletarianization now affecting doctors, teachers and other professionals. Scientists must recognize their common interests with all workers facing attacks on their living standards, jobs and democratic rights. No matter your education level or salary, to the oligarchy that rules America, you are as expendable as any other worker.

A genuine defense of science requires the preparation of mass strike action by all federal workers, including those in scientific agencies, against job cuts, funding freezes and attacks on working conditions. This must be connected to a broader movement of the entire working class, in the US and internationally, against inequality and exploitation.

The Trump regime is not an aberration occurring within an arc of societal progress. It is the product of decades of social decline centered in the American capitalist system, whose hallmarks are global wars, poverty, disease and climate catastrophe. The only social force capable of defending science, public health and democratic rights is the international working class, mobilized in a common struggle against the capitalist system that is the source of this decay.



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