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AFGE, AFL-CIO oppose mobilizing workers in opposition to Musk/Trump mass firings



President Donald Trump listens as Elon Musk speaks in the Oval Office at the White House, Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2025, in Washington. [AP Photo/Alex Brandon]

Thousands of federal workers across multiple departments and agencies received termination letters on Friday as part of the ongoing purge of workers overseen by billionaires Elon Musk and Donald Trump. Under the smokescreen of improving “government efficiency,” senior workers as well as probationary workers across all departments have received letters informing them that due to “poor performance,” their services are no longer needed.

Workers are not being fired for “poor performance” but as part of a purge overseen by the unelected fascist oligarch Musk to cut government spending in the service of tax cuts for the financial and corporate elite and increased military spending. The *Washington Post* estimates that so far 14,000 workers have been fired.

This week's firings are the largest purge of government workers since President Ronald Reagan's ruthless firing of 11,345 air traffic controllers in 1981 during the Professional Air Traffic Contollers Organization (PATCO) strike. The AFL-CIO isolated the PATCO strikers and refused to mobilize workers to strike in *en masse* against government union-busting and in defense of workers' jobs and democratic rights, allowing the ruling class to smash the strike and permanently fire the controllers.

The scale of that assault on the working class pales in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of federal jobs targeted for elimination by Trump, Musk and the fabulously wealthy elite they represent. The attack on federal workers is, moreover, the leading edge of an unprecedented attack on the jobs, wages and conditions of all workers, public and private, as well as the gutting of public health, education, welfare, science and cultural programs on which tens of millions of working families depend.

In the face of this dictatorial rampage, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the largest federal employee union, which purports to represent 800,000 workers in the federal government, has refused to mount any defense or opposition beyond filing lawsuits. The same goes for the AFL-CIO and the rest of the bureaucratized and corporatist trade unions.

Prior to this week, there were some 2.4 million workers, not including US Postal Service workers, employed by the federal government. While 20 percent worked in the Washington D.C. metro area, the rest worked outside of D.C. Roughly 30 percent of federal workers are veterans.

The federal government is not only the largest employer of veterans in the United States, it is the largest employer as a whole in the country, ahead of Walmart (1.5 million) and Amazon (1.1 million).

On Thursday, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—which employed some 486,000 people prior to this week—announced that more than 1,000 workers at the agency were fired under Musk and Trump's "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) initiative.

In addition to the VA, mass layoffs have occurred at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Department of Education (ED), Department of Energy (DOE), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Park Service (NPS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), General Services Administration (GSA), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Housing and Urban Development

(HUD), US Forest Service (USFS), National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The mass firings will impact workers previously responsible for managing forests, detecting pandemics, issuing education grants, administering Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid benefits, overseeing veterans' services and providing oversight of food, industrial and financial institutions. All regulatory restraints on corporations are being removed, giving them free rein to exploit workers and consumers alike.

In a statement issued Friday, AFGE National President Everett Kelley wrote that workers caught in the "sweeping terminations" were given "no notice, no due process, and no opportunity to defend themselves." Yet Kelley did not call for workers to mobilize to strike. Instead, he pledged that AFGE would "pursue every legal challenge available."

The AFL-CIO has likewise refused to mobilize its 15 million members in support of federal workers. Instead, AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler announced the formation of the absurdly named "Department of People Who Work for a Living."



Department of People Who Work for a Living logo.

In a video, Shuler claimed that the "DPWL" was created for this "unprecedented moment," to "unite working people to stand up against these attacks." How is this to be done? Shuler explained:

So when a big story breaks, the Department of People Who Work for a Living will bring in workers who are on the ground, leaders from our unions and voices across our movement to help you make sense of what is going on and what you can do about it.

In other words, *after* the termination notices have been filed, the bureaucracy will work to suppress any genuine mobilization and instead channel mass outrage back into futile court challenges and legal appeals, which will inevitably be struck down by pro-Trump judges, including the far right-dominated US Supreme Court.

Making clear the cowardice and complicity of the AFL-CIO, on Friday the “Department of People Who Work for a Living” X account tweeted a video featuring American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten. Weingarten publicly supports Trump’s choice for labor secretary and has pledged to cooperate with the fascistic administration, which plans to close down the Department of Education in order to starve the public schools and privatize the education system. In the less-than-60-second video, Weingarten mouthed empty platitudes that excluded any call to mobilize the working class in defense of jobs or any mention of the word “strike.”

The refusal of the unions, along with the Democratic Party, to wage a struggle against Musk and Trump’s mass firings will have real-life consequences. The layoffs reported on Friday included the purging of the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), an elite training program established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1951.

EIS agents, often referred to as “disease detectives,” are deployed around the world on short notice to track and control emerging outbreaks. EIS officers are generally doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, warned that the firings will “destroy the EIS, which is one of the absolute crown jewels of global public health.”

The refusal of the trade unions to fight back against the illegal firings is not a mistake but expresses the social chasm between the high-level, upper-middle-class bureaucrats and the rank-and-file workers.

There can be no progressive solution to the crisis by repeating the mistakes of the past. Calling on the Democrats to fight, or hoping the trade union apparatus will win in court, is a dead-end recipe for defeat.

Federal workers across all agencies and departments should organize independently of the AFGE and AFL-CIO bureaucracies and appeal for wide support and action from all sections of the working class, including linking up with immigrant workers, who are facing fascistic attacks on their lives.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). These committees will transfer power from the apparatus to the rank and file and prepare a real fight against the mass layoffs of the Trump administration.



A section of a protest in Annapolis, Maryland on February 5, 2025.

Similar committees should be formed in schools, hospitals and neighborhoods to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights. They must serve as the means to coordinate and unite the struggles that are emerging and will grow explosively in the coming weeks and months.