



# President Trump's Anti-Worker Agenda

By Saharra Griffin and Malkie Wall August 28, 2019

President Donald Trump promised to defend “forgotten workers,” but these workers were never forgotten—they were victims of the most well-funded lobbying campaign in history.<sup>1</sup> For decades, large corporations have sought to ensure that the majority of economic gains are absorbed by executives and shareholders—not employees, who are the backbone of the American economy. President Trump has embraced this right-wing lobbying effort to an unprecedented degree, making it increasingly unclear where lobbyists’ influence ends and his administration’s policies begin.

Below are some of the Trump administration’s ongoing efforts to stack the deck against American workers.

## Enabled corporate wage theft

**Denied overtime pay to 8.2 million workers.** The Trump administration derailed an Obama-era plan to extend overtime protections to more Americans and instead lowered the salary threshold.<sup>2</sup> This decision harmed millions of workers who would have been eligible for overtime pay under the previous rule. Workers are being denied an estimated \$1.2 billion in earnings annually due to Trump’s overtime protection rollback.<sup>3</sup>

**Undermined wage theft enforcement.** Employer wage theft is rampant in low-wage industries and costs American workers more than \$50 billion every year.<sup>4</sup> But the Trump administration made it more difficult for businesses to be held liable for wage violations against contract and franchise workers.<sup>5</sup> Under President Trump, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has even allowed employers who commit wage violations to avoid penalties by volunteering to police themselves.<sup>6</sup> Businesses are expected to self-report violations, determine the amount of back pay owed, and then compensate workers—without covering interest or damages.

**Awarded billions in federal contracts to companies that violate wage laws.** President Trump ended a requirement that contractors meet federal labor standards to keep the government’s business.<sup>7</sup> This decision came as two-thirds of the government’s largest contractors were found to have violated wage laws, including by withholding hundreds of millions of dollars in pay.<sup>8</sup> Instead of protecting the 26 million workers who are employed by federal contractors, the Trump administration chose to ignore this egregious behavior.

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## Restricted worker power and attacked unions

**Undermined the mission of the DOL.** President Trump's nominee to lead U.S. labor policy, Eugene Scalia, has a long record of opposing workers' rights and fighting unions on behalf of large corporations.<sup>9</sup> The Trump administration has only filled 43 percent of the department's senior officials, while previous administrations filled nearly 80 percent.<sup>10</sup>

**Blocked workers' access to the courts.** The Trump administration sided with corporate interests to let companies force workers into mandatory arbitration agreements.<sup>11</sup> This has left 60 million workers without real access to the courts and unable to bring class action lawsuits to seek justice in workplace disputes.<sup>12</sup>

**Made it more difficult for workers to unionize.** President Trump's National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) appointees empowered companies to classify workers as independent contractors rather than as employees, which would exclude those workers from federal labor law protections.<sup>13</sup> His NLRB is also working to roll back joint employer protections, which would make it easier for businesses that influence and rely on subcontractors and franchises for their labor to avoid unionization.<sup>14</sup>

**Made it easier for employers to get rid of unions.** President Trump's appointees to the NLRB ruled that employers can suspend negotiations and withdraw recognition of a union even if the majority of workers technically supports the union at the time of withdrawal.<sup>15</sup>

## Advanced an erratic trade agenda that harms working-class Americans

President Trump claimed that other countries would bear the brunt of his trade war, but in reality, American workers and families have paid the price.<sup>16</sup> President Trump's tariffs could cost the average U.S. household \$1,000 each year, and recent estimates indicate that the tariffs will shave billions from U.S. GDP.<sup>17</sup> American manufacturers, including U.S. Steel, are buckling under the strain of his poorly conceived and executed trade war by tweet.<sup>18</sup>

Like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which includes strong protections for Big Pharma, President Trump's trade war with China is primarily designed to favor corporations; his trade demands focus on protecting corporate intellectual property and increasing access to Chinese markets for Wall Street investors.<sup>19</sup>

While China poses legitimate challenges, Trump's tariffs fail to effectively address them. His policies have failed to address low labor and environmental standards or the race to the bottom for wages and corporate tax rates.<sup>20</sup>

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## Threatened workers' retirement savings

The Trump administration eliminated retirees' protection from exploitative financial advisers by killing the fiduciary rule, which required financial advisers to act in the best interest of their clients.<sup>21</sup> This decision threatens retirees, since brokers often have an incentive to promote products that are profitable for their employers but costly for clients.<sup>22</sup> Nationwide, conflicted financial advice costs American retirement savers an estimated \$17 billion each year.<sup>23</sup>

## Empowered employer discrimination by revoking civil rights protections

**Undermined anti-discrimination enforcement.** The Trump administration moved to kill an Obama-era rule that would have enabled the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to collect annual pay data by gender, race, and ethnicity from large employers.<sup>24</sup> After a federal court ruled this decision unlawful, the Trump administration has continued to stall implementation of pay data collection.

**Exposed LGBTQ Americans to employer discrimination.** President Trump's U.S. Department of Justice defended employers' ability to discriminate against LGBTQ workers, arguing to the U.S. Supreme Court that the Civil Rights Act's prohibitions on sex discrimination do not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>25</sup> His administration is attempting to expand religious exemptions to nondiscrimination protections for federal contractors, which employ one-quarter of the nation's workforce.<sup>26</sup> In addition, President Trump opposes the Equality Act, federal legislation that would confirm and strengthen civil rights protections for LGBTQ workers.<sup>27</sup>

**Erected barriers to prevent people with disabilities from working.** President Trump's ongoing threats to Medicaid would end access to home- and community-based care services that allow many people with disabilities to live independently and work outside the home.<sup>28</sup>

## Threatened workers' safety on the job

**Made it easier for employers to expose workers to hazardous conditions.** In clear disregard for worker safety, the Trump administration reversed protections against pesticides and chemicals that have been shown to cause illness and neurological damage.<sup>29</sup> His administration has also weakened workplace safety protections for particularly dangerous industries such as offshore drilling and mining.<sup>30</sup>

**Reduced workplace safety enforcement.** Enforcement activity by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has declined under President Trump, and the agency employs fewer inspectors than it has at any other time in the agency's history. Meanwhile, data suggest that work-related deaths are on the rise.<sup>31</sup> The Trump administration has also stopped requiring employers to submit detailed information on workplace injuries and illnesses and limited OSHA's ability to issue citations for violations.<sup>32</sup>

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## Endnotes

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