

Federal workers describe weeks of uncertainty

Worries persist despite judge’s 2-week reprieve

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USA TODAY

In recent months, tens of thousands of federal workers have been fired, re-hired and threatened with firing again. For now, they have a two-week reprieve, after a federal judge in California ordered the Trump administration not to carry out any additional firings for two weeks, but the administration has asked the Supreme Court to overturn that ruling.

Employees describe weeks of uncertainty, worry and doubt as their jobs are off, then on, then off again.

“This entire chaos-causing situation has been inefficiency in the name of efficiency,” said one federal employee who received a reduction in force notification, and who asked not to be identified for fear of retribution. “I was RIF’d then told I’m not. It makes it very hard to know what to believe and makes it incredibly difficult to trust your employer.”

Thousands of probationary workers were fired in February. In response to a series of court rulings, the employees were rehired, then fired again. Separately, thousands of employees departed under a voluntary program known as the “fork in the road.” Then in April and May, thousands more left under incentive-based programs to leave or retire early. Some of those who chose to leave in that third round had their requests rejected.

“Emotionally this has been draining on me and my family and has impacted every facet of our lives,” the federal employee told USA TODAY. “It increases your stress, ruins your work life balance, and really strains your home life.”

U.S. District Court Judge Susan Illston issued a temporary restraining order May 9 against the government’s planned reductions in force in a case in the Northern District of California. President Donald Trump and the offices driving the budget and personnel reductions likely exceeded their authority, Illston wrote.

Her order blocked any action on the



Federal employees rally on March 19 in Chicago. The rally was organized by the National Treasury Employees Union to voice concerns about the mass firing of federal workers. SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

planned terminations of more than 100,000 employees at 21 agencies and departments until May 23.

However, on May 16, after a flurry of back and forths with the court, the Trump administrative appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn Illston’s restraining order.

The order addressed concerns laid out among 1,000 pages of evidence presented in a lawsuit filed by the American Federation of Government Employees and two dozen other plaintiffs, including other union locals, nonprofits and local governments. The president may have the ability to pursue new policy priorities but can’t make large-scale changes to an agency without Congress, “its co-equal branch and partner,” the order stated. It added: “Unchecked presidential power is not what the Framers had in mind.”

The order directed agencies not to approve any reductions in force and to complete no further implementation of Trump’s executive order or memos from the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management. Another hearing was scheduled for May 22.

The California case is one of dozens of lawsuits against the administration.

Scores of injunctions have been issued by both Democratic- and Republican-appointed judges in very different jurisdictions, Jody Freeman, a Harvard law professor, said during a May 14 webinar. Illston was appointed by President Bill Clinton.

Feds resist releasing reorg plans

Although Illston directed the government to turn over copies of the planned reductions in force and reorganizations, the government resisted, saying the documents are privileged and “simply irrelevant to future proceedings of the court.”

As it stands now, the government is supposed to provide copies of two reorganization plans from agencies of its choosing to the court for her to review by noon May 19.

Many agencies already have reported the departure of 10% to 20% of their employees through the firings of probationary employees and an assortment of voluntary retirements and incentive-based departures. Based on the documents in the case filed by the government employees federation, Illston’s order included the following planned staff reductions:

- Health and Human Services would fire 8,000-10,000, making a total of at least 20,000 departures this year, more than 20% of the staff.
 - Energy Department would cut 8,500, nearly half its workforce.
 - National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, already down by an estimated 2,000 employees, could reduce its remaining workforce of an estimated 10,000 people by more than half.
 - IRS would reduce its remaining staff by 40%.
 - National Science Foundation would eliminate roughly half of its 1,700 employees.
 - Veterans Affairs plans to cut 83,000 positions.
 - Small Business Administration would cut its workforce by 40%.
- The order also stated the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health would fire 221 of the 222 employees in its Pittsburgh office, which researches health hazards faced by mine workers.

However, in testimony during a May 14 congressional budget hearing, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said he had ordered about 100 of those positions to be reinstated. Additionally, Kennedy said, he’d ordered 100 positions restored in West Virginia and 100 in the World Trade Center health program.

The reductions in force already had been set into motion in several agencies. The agencies had been required by the administration to file the first phase of the reorganizations by March 13, and the second phase, including the reductions in force, were due April 14.

Although the Department of Governmental Efficiency – implemented by executive order on Inauguration Day and led by billionaire Elon Musk – has attracted a lot of attention for its cuts to contracts, the order makes it clear that the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management are playing key roles in the efforts to reduce budgets and staff.

Among those in the president’s inner circle who have been very involved is Russell Vought, budget director in both Trump administrations. Vought was a key author of the Heritage Foundation’s “Project 2025.”

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