

Bush Watch

Privatizing Government

Early in its administration, the Bush White House declared war on its own employees, announcing plans to privatize 850,000 federal jobs and take away collective bargaining rights from thousands more federal workers. Saying it needed “flexibility” in dealing with the threat of terrorism, the Bush administration proposed gutting Defense Department civil service rules and denied bargaining rights to 60,000 airport screeners and the 170,000 employees of the Homeland Security Department. It also developed plans to sell off the nation’s Postal Service and is looking to privatize the air traffic control system, a move that could put airline passengers at risk.

Established System to Eliminate 850,000 Federal Jobs

The Bush administration on May 29, 2003, unveiled a plan to eliminate federal jobs and contract out the work to private companies. The changes were made in the rules that govern contracting out—Office of Management and Budget Circular A-76—and gave private companies the advantage over federal workers in the private–public competition process, federal workers’ unions say. In November 2002, the Bush administration announced its goal of putting 850,000 federal jobs up for bid.

Proposed Gutting Defense Department Civil Service Protections

The Bush administration has proposed legislation to allow the Defense Department to gut the current personnel system that governs the workers’ pay, salary increases, hiring, firing, job classifications and many other federal workplace rules. It would allow the department to create an entirely new personnel system that could eliminate congressional oversight of many personnel policies, deprive workers of current workplace rights and place much more unchecked personnel decision-making power in the hands of supervisors.

Set Stage to Privatize Nation’s Air Traffic Control System

Bush signed an Executive Order in June 2002 that takes away the nation’s air traffic control system’s designation as an “inherently governmental” operation—effectively opening the door to privatizing the system. Under the

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), some 15,000 controllers at airports and air traffic control centers across the nation control flights carrying 1 million passengers a day. On Sept. 11, 2001, FAA controllers safely landed some 5,000 planes within two hours after all flights were ordered grounded. In 2003, both houses of Congress voted to stop the privatization effort by attaching an anti-privatization measure to the Federal Aviation Reauthorization bill, but Bush threatened to veto the legislation, and the measure was dropped. Following a public outcry, Bush in December 2003 agreed to a one-year moratorium on air traffic control privatization.

Delayed New, Stronger Aircraft Maintenance Rules

The Bush administration delayed new rules governing repair and maintenance work performed on U.S. airlines’ aircraft at overseas repair stations certified by the FAA. Bush’s March 2003 action came days before the start of the war with Iraq amid growing concern about terrorism and



security. The delay, requested by the airline industry, is opposed by aviation unions and aviation safety groups. The rules Bush delayed would have strengthened the repair and maintenance regulations overseas stations are required to meet so they can receive and maintain their FAA certification. Without such certification, they cannot repair U.S. aircraft flown domestically and internationally.

Failed to Inform Postal Workers Who Handled Ricin

The Bush administration in November failed to alert postal employees they may have handled a package containing the deadly poison ricin. *The Washington Post* on Feb. 5, 2004, reported a letter mailed to the White House from a Chattanooga, Tenn., post office that was intercepted at an offsite White House mail sorting facility in the Washington, D.C., area contained a powdery substance that tests indicated was ricin. The November 2003 incident came to light in February. According to *The Washington Post* article, the Secret Service did not notify the FBI, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service or other federal agencies about the November ricin discovery until six days after the letter was intercepted.

Canceled Holidays for Airport Screeners

After eliminating 6,000 federal airport security screener jobs, the Bush administration's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) last year canceled all holiday leave for the remaining 48,000 screeners and forced many employees to work overtime during the Thanksgiving holidays. AFGC President John Gage says TSA's mismanagement and "contractor waste and abuse" caused cost overruns and job cuts. As a result, Gage said, passengers had to deal with "staffing shortages on a daily basis at many airports across the country, not just at peak holiday travel days."

Proposed Cutting Schools for Children in Military Families

At the same time he was relying on America's troops to fight a war in Iraq, Bush proposed cutting education funding for children in military families in his fiscal year 2004 budget request. Bush proposed cutting federal impact aid funding—a federal program to compensate school districts for the property tax income they lose when tax-exempt properties (such as military bases) are within their boundaries. Cutting the \$125 million program would affect 900,000 children.

Appointed Postal Service Privatization Commission Without Worker Representation

In December 2002, Bush appointed a nine-member commission to study the U.S. Postal Service as part of his plan "to allow private contractors to compete for nearly half of the government's civilian jobs," according to a Dec. 11, 2002, article in *The Washington Post*. The commission did not include any representatives from postal unions. The Postal Service employs about 750,000 workers at 38,000 facilities. The lack of a postal union representative on the commission follows a Bush administration pattern of excluding workers' representatives on government panels studying workplace issues (see page 14).

Appointed Members to Amtrak Board Who Seek to Privatize the System

In September 2003, the Bush administration nominated three privatization backers to serve on the Amtrak board of directors, including Louis Thompson, who led the World Bank's effort to privatize railroads in several countries. Bush also authored a plan to privatize the nation's railway system, which threatens the jobs of some 20,000 Amtrak workers.



RALPH ALSWANG

“Privatization [of air traffic control] has failed miserably in other countries, from both financial and safety perspectives. I don’t want to see the same happen here in the United States. Frankly, if my tower gets privatized, I’ll retire. I refuse to put passengers in danger all in the name of the dollar.”

—Chuck Adams
air traffic controller
Grand Forks, N.D.

Read more about the Bush record on privatizing government at

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