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Court Backs Trump's Move to Curb Union Bargaining for Federal Workers

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A federal appeals court ruled Friday to allow former President Donald Trump's executive order limiting union bargaining rights for certain federal employees to proceed,

overturning a previous injunction that had blocked its implementation. The decision marks a legal win for the Trump administration's efforts to reshape federal workforce rules and reduce union influence within the federal government.

The three-judge panel from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, based in San Francisco, reversed a June decision by U.S. District Judge James Donato. Donato had halted the enforcement of Trump's March executive order, which removed collective bargaining obligations from more than a dozen federal agencies. He argued that the order appeared retaliatory toward unions that had criticized the administration and filed legal challenges against it, thus violating their First Amendment rights to free speech.

However, the appellate court disagreed with that conclusion. In its decision, the panel stated the executive order "does not express any retaliatory animus," and concluded that the administration likely would have pursued the same policy regardless of union opposition. The court sided with the administration's argument that the move was a policy decision aimed at improving federal agency efficiency rather than punishing political dissent.

The panel included U.S. Circuit Judge John Owens, appointed by former President Barack Obama, and Judges Bridget Bade and Daniel Bress, both appointed by Trump. The ruling effectively lifts the injunction while the case continues through the appeals process.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), one of six unions that challenged the order, criticized the ruling. AFGE National President Everett Kelley called the decision "a setback for First Amendment rights in America," but expressed confidence in the union's legal challenge as it moves forward.

Trump's executive order significantly expands exemptions to collective bargaining obligations under the Civil Service Reform Act. The order applies to federal agencies with missions related to national security, intelligence, law enforcement, and counterintelligence. Among the departments affected are the U.S. Departments of Justice, Defense, State, Treasury, and Health and Human Services.

By removing collective bargaining rights from these agencies, the administration sought to give agency leadership greater flexibility to modify working conditions, streamline personnel decisions, and discipline underperforming staff without union intervention. It also restricts unions from challenging administrative policies through legal or procedural channels.

Another federal appeals court in Washington, D.C., had already paused a separate order that similarly blocked Trump's policy, indicating judicial momentum toward upholding the administration's position.

The White House did not issue an immediate response to the ruling.

The case highlights broader questions about the balance between government efficiency and union representation within the federal workforce. While labor groups warn of the implications for workers' rights and free speech, supporters of the policy see it as a necessary step to rein in bureaucratic delays and ensure accountability within federal agencies.