

Government for the people—or for plutocrats?

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As Donald Trump fought to reclaim the White House, he professed to be a champion of everyday Americans—people who work hard for a living yet are struggling to cover basic expenses. And a majority of voters in the last election put their faith in him. But early signs suggest that rather than delivering for working families, Trump is poised to do the bidding of Big Tech and the billionaires who bankrolled his campaign.

A new Gilded Age is emerging—this time driven by kingpins of the tech industrial complex. President Joe Biden warned in his farewell speech last week that “an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead.”

Will the “People’s House” become the plutocrats’ haunt? Elon Musk is expected to have office space in the White House complex. A who’s who of titans of industry has paraded through Mar-a-Lago since the election. Several big donors to Trump’s campaign and inauguration are facing federal investigations into their business practices, including Amazon, Goldman Sachs and Meta. Some of the biggest contributors come from the financial, cryptocurrency and tech sectors—all seeking government deregulation of their industries. And many Trump allies in the artificial intelligence arena want no guardrails at all. Whether they seek access, influence or advantage—or simply fear retribution from a notoriously vengeful president—it all points to the rich and powerful gaining favor with the new administration, rather than working families struggling to make ends meet and striving for a better life.

High prices for groceries, gas, healthcare and housing drove many voters to the polls. Trump crowed after the election that he “won on groceries” and that he will “bring those prices way down.” Recently, however, he said his vow to lower costs quickly for American families will be a “very hard task” to deliver on. So far, there is no indication it’s even on his agenda.

Trump has said he wants to drastically cut government safety-net programs in order to extend 2017 tax cuts that expire at the end of this year. Republicans in Washington are considering plans to eliminate the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act and Title I, which provides vital supports to children from low-income families. They are looking at dramatic cuts to Medicaid, which, along with the Children’s Health Insurance Program, serves about 79 million mostly low-income or disabled Americans. And they have proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which alleviates hunger for more than 40 million children, parents, older adults, disabled people, workers and other low-income people each month, including 1 in 5 children.

Slashing essential programs for Americans with the greatest needs to pay for tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires would be a monumental betrayal of the people who voted for Trump seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

Will Trump deliver for working families or for his billionaire backers?

Republicans have majority control of the House, Senate and White House—and with it, the reins of a country that has been heading in the right direction. Wages are up, inflation has cooled, and most economic indicators are improving. They have an opportunity—and, I would say, an obligation—to build on this prog-

ress. Americans didn’t vote to annex Greenland or rename the Gulf of Mexico. We are looking for leaders to lower the cost of everyday goods, raise wages, expand access to healthcare, strengthen public education, protect retirement security and make housing more affordable.

Trump is expected to launch his second term with an avalanche of far-ranging executive orders. I am worried about our fundamental rights, our democracy, and whether we are headed toward autocracy and oligarchy. Our tests for this new administration’s actions are straightforward: Do they help make people’s lives better? Do they provide opportunity for all? Do they respect people’s humanity and dignity?

All this makes knowledge and agency even more important. And that comes from access to a great public education, good jobs and union membership—values the AFT fights for every day—for all Americans.

Progress is possible, for even in this liminal space, many elected officials want to give Americans a fair shot. Republicans and Democrats came together in December to pass the Social Security Fairness Act to correct an injustice to firefighters, police officers, teachers and other public employees who had paid into Social Security but been denied full benefits. That’s the kind of relief Americans are looking for—relief that puts more money in their pockets and gives them a chance to get ahead.

The incoming president made lots of promises to working people during the campaign. Let’s work together to call on him and so many others to walk the walk, not simply talk the talk.



Weingarten, behind President Biden, attends the signing of the Social Security Fairness Act, Jan. 5, 2025.

Photo courtesy of the White House.

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