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## The largest federal employee union punches back at Trump

By **Joe Davidson**

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As President Trump continues battering federal employees, their largest union sent him a rousing retort Monday that it might be bloodied, but not busted.

Delegates to the American Federation of Government Employees legislative conference were fired up by high-profile speakers, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and three Republicans, who pledged their support as Trump continues to push policies that would hit the workers' wallets and the ability of unions to represent them.

Even as they were meeting in the Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill hotel, Trump released a fiscal 2021 budget proposal that would make most federal employees pay more for a cut in retirement benefits.

And in a Jan. 29 memo, first reported by Government Executive, Trump gave Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper the power to stop collective bargaining with federal unions. "Where collective bargaining is incompatible with these organizations' missions," the memo says, "the Department of Defense should not be forced to sacrifice its national security mission."

Everett Kelley, the union's secretary-treasurer and acting president, said "denying nearly half a million Defense Department workers the collective bargaining rights guaranteed to them by law since 1962 would be a travesty — and doing it under the guise of 'national security' would be a disgrace to the sacred oath and obligation that all federal workers make to their country. This administration will not stop until it takes away all workers' rights to form and join a union, and we will not stop doing everything we can to prevent that from happening."

They have some powerful help — namely Pelosi, who was greeted as a hero and welcomed with a long and loud standing ovation. House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) also spoke.

When you get into the arena with Trump, Pelosi said to cheers, "you have to be ready to take a punch; you got to be ready to throw a punch."

The punches they have taken include three 2018 executive orders that made it more difficult for labor organizations to organize and represent federal staffers. But labor punched back and recently won 12 weeks of paid parental leave and a 3.1 percent pay raise for 2020, despite initial opposition from Trump, who earlier had proposed a pay freeze.

In addition, the House last week approved the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, which would strengthen the ability of workers nationally to organize. Passage in the Republican-controlled Senate is doubtful, yet the same once was said about the parental leave and pay raise bills that are now law.

Securing Pelosi's attendance was quite the attraction for the union members, particularly after her high-profile, speech-ripping confrontation with Trump at his State of the Union address last week. Also notable during this time of harsh partisanship were speeches by three Republicans, including Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, to an organization that usually, but not strictly, endorses Democrats. Republican Reps. Tom Cole (Okla.) and Brian Fitzpatrick (Pa.) also spoke.

Collins was greeted warmly, though one shout of “impeach” was heard from the audience. Collins, like all but one Republican, voted to acquit Trump of the impeachment charges lodged by the Democrats who control the House. They said Trump withheld military aid to Ukraine in an attempt to have its president announce an investigation into his rival, former vice president Joe Biden and Biden’s son Hunter, for the president’s personal, political gain.

Collins rejected Trump’s rationale of Pentagon “flexibility” as the reason for his plan to exclude Defense staffers from labor negotiations with management. “Please know,” she said to cheers, “that I will work with my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to protect the right of DOD civilian employees to engage in collective bargaining.”

The other senator on the podium was a longtime, strong supporter of federal employees, Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat who represents thousands of them, particularly in the District suburbs and in the Hampton Roads area.

Though Trump’s impeachment acquittal is less than a week old, it seemed forgotten (except for the shout when Collins took the stage) until Kaine decided to discuss “the elephant in the room.”

“I don’t want to re-litigate it, but I want to point out something very unusual and unique and special about it,” he said. It was the first presidential impeachment generated “by courageous federal employees. When they saw something wrong, they were willing” to speak up, he said, before being interrupted by applause.

“It wasn’t just the folks who testified,” he added. “But what we know from the impeachment trial is that many . . . stepped forward and said that this was wrong, this is against U.S. policy, you’re hurting our country, you’re hurting an ally. . . .

“The American public and Congress would not have even known about this slimy scheme, if it were not for the federal employees.”

Kaine named no names. That's a good thing, given the retribution Trump exacted against Marie Yovanovitch, Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman and Gordon Sondland, all of whom testified during the House impeachment hearings and none of whom kept their positions.

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### **Joe Davidson**

Columnist Joe Davidson covers federal government issues in the Federal Insider, formerly the Federal Diary. Davidson previously was an assistant city editor at The Washington Post and a Washington and foreign correspondent with the Wall Street Journal, where he covered federal agencies and political campaigns. Follow 

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