

Corporate Pardons: The Trump plan to let corporations get away with crimes is ripping off Americans

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Foreword

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Big business has long lobbied for corporate criminals to be granted special treatment, even as the vast scale of corporate misconduct inflicts harms far costlier and deadlier than any individual offender ever could. Strong federal enforcement against corporate lawbreaking protects Americans' hard-earned income and saves lives. It also ensures that honest, law-abiding businesses are not unfairly disadvantaged when they compete in the marketplace against unscrupulous businesses that pad their profits by breaking the law.

Now, the Trump administration is overseeing the zealous destruction and unbridled corruption of federal enforcement against corporate lawbreaking. Consumer protection agencies are being gutted, and established laws are being ignored. That this is happening even as President Trump ramps up gratuitously authoritarian crackdowns on immigrants, people in poverty, and unspecified crime in cities in the name of "law and order" is both ironic and tragic. The unprecedented retreat from enforcement against corporate lawbreaking we are witnessing will leave Americans far less safe. Allowing powerful corporations to go unpunished for their misconduct will only embolden their disregard and disrespect for essential protections.

Many describe the dramatic abandonment of enforcement against corporate lawbreaking under Trump as "corporate pardons." This might have seemed hyperbolic until Trump himself signed what appears to be the first-ever presidential pardon for a corporation, the cryptocurrency exchange BitMEX, which pleaded guilty to criminal anti-money laundering failures and was sentenced to pay \$100 million and serve two years of probation. [1] With literal corporate pardons now on the table, big businesses willing to pay to wipe their records clean will lobby for just that. The White House, meanwhile, is keeping score – Axios revealed the administration is keeping a list of more than 500 corporations and trade groups and noting which most loyally supported Trump's "Big Beautiful Bill," and which did not. [2]

The Trump administration has already halted or dropped federal enforcement actions against more than 160 corporations. [3] One-fifth of the 122 corporations the administration rewarded with dropped enforcement donated to Trump's inauguration; one-third have business or political ties to Trump. Executive orders have frozen whole categories of enforcement, leading to the withdrawal of investigations and enforcement lawsuits. The message that corporate lawbreakers will be let off the hook is clear – especially when those corporate lawbreakers belong to favored industries or have inside connections with the administration.

The American public's faith in the federal government's ability to enforce the law fairly and equitably is being tested like never before. Protecting Americans from corporate lawbreaking should not be partisan – it should be common sense. No one should be above the law – not the biggest businesses, not the most well-connected executives. The egregious examples highlighted here by Senator Chris Murphy offer a clear guide about how not to hold corporations accountable. Let's consider them carefully, then do all we can to end corporate impunity and ensure the law is on the people's side.

Introduction: Trump's System for Corporate Pardons

When Trump pardoned the criminals who attacked the Capitol to overturn the 2020 election, including those who viciously assaulted police officers, he sent a dangerous message that breaking the law is fine if you are on his side. But more quietly, Trump has also been letting major corporations and their executives off the hook for breaking the law, inviting corporations to keep harming, poisoning, and even killing people with more impunity than before.

Excusing political violence when it benefits you and using the apparatus of the state to reward the individuals and corporations that brought you to power are two tactics used by autocrats around the world. It was already far too easy for wealthy corporations to use their money and power to buy influence in our democracy. Rather than trying to reduce corporate power, Trump is using it to entrench his own power, eroding any shred of hope from workers and citizens that the institutions of the government they elect will even try to protect them.

These “corporate pardons,” as they’ve been termed [4], are happening throughout the federal government, in the form of rescinded orders, dropped cases, and the first-ever presidential pardon for a corporation. This report will describe eight such cases where Trump permitted major corporations to rip off their consumers, mistreat their workers, and do lasting damage to local communities – all so that Trump could draw powerful corporations more tightly into his ruling elite.

The Trump administration has also been busy changing laws and rolling back regulations to enshrine corporate power more generally, but these corporate pardons go beyond that. Instead, these eight cases are specific instances where a corporation broke laws that are still on the books, the federal government moved to hold them accountable, and now the Trump administration is letting them go. And they are just the tip of the iceberg. Public Citizen’s Corporate Enforcement Tracker counts more than 160 cases that the Trump administration has halted or dropped, and even that is not a comprehensive list. [5]

Each time a federal agency walks back an action to stop corporate wrongdoing, it has typically been covered and understood as a separate story. But these are not isolated incidents. This is a concerted policy to deepen Trump’s alliance with the billionaires and corporations who support him as they take over the government and use its power to steal from the American people.

Many of Trump’s working-class voters believed that the economy was rigged against them and, for all of Trump’s imperfections, they believed he was the candidate most likely to blow up the status quo. Those voters were right that our economy is fundamentally corrupted – tilted in countless ways against working Americans and toward the rich and powerful. But in each of the cases in this report, Trump is betraying their trust by rigging the system even more tightly for himself and his corporate allies.

Eight Case Studies of Trump Corporate Pardons

1. Big Banks allow scammers to flourish on Zelle and get away with it

Congress created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, after big banks caused the Great Recession with their greed, recklessness, and predatory lending. Millions of working-class Americans lost their homes or jobs, while bank executives got taxpayer-funded bonuses. When a financial institution breaks the law now, the CFPB's job is to hold them accountable and make them compensate the customers they wronged. As of January 30, 2025, consumers had gotten roughly \$20 billion in direct relief from financial institutions due to the CFPB's actions. [6]

In 2024, the CFPB cracked down on rampant fraud and scams to steal from ordinary consumers that were enabled by the Zelle payment system, which is owned by seven of the nation's largest banks. The CFPB sued Zelle's parent company, Early Warning Systems (EWS), and three of the seven banks that own EWS: Wells Fargo, JPMorgan Chase, and Bank of America. Customers for these three banks alone lost more than \$870 million to fraud on Zelle. [7]

Big banks were caught off guard by the rising popularity of money transfer apps like Venmo and CashApp, which were a major threat to their business. [8] Zelle was their answer – a money transfer system marketed to their customers as the safest option since “it was backed by the banks so you know it's secure,” in the words of an early advertisement. [9]

Customers trusted Zelle because it was built directly into their banking apps. That trust was misplaced. The big banks rushed Zelle to market to compete with other money transfer apps without putting adequate systems in place that would detect and prevent fraud. For example, Zelle made it easy for criminals to mask their identity as part of their scams. Banks using Zelle did not share information with each other about fraudulent transactions, so even known repeat offenders could keep using Zelle by simply moving from one bank to another. When the banks got a flood of information about fraud on Zelle – hundreds of thousands of consumer complaints – they failed to apply that data to put a stop to it. [10]

In addition to the lack of protection against fraud, these banks also broke the law when they refused to compensate customers whose accounts were drained by transfers the customer did not authorize. This included cases where thieves stole customer phones and then used the phone's banking app to drain the account, or where fraudsters obtained a customer's Zelle password to take over and drain their account. In some cases, the banks even told their customers to contact the criminal to ask for their money back. [11]

Big banks wasted no time currying favor with the incoming Trump administration. They donated huge sums of money to Trump's inauguration, including over \$1 million from JPMorgan Chase and \$500,000 from Bank of America. [12] The nation's six largest banks, including all three named in the CFPB's Zelle lawsuit, also dropped out of a climate

change group called the Net Zero Banking Alliance, sponsored by the United Nations, to avoid the appearance of dissent from the Trump agenda. [13]

After President Trump took office, the CFPB dismissed, without explanation, its own lawsuit against Zelle and the big banks. [14] This means the CFPB is giving up on making the banks refund customers for money that was stolen via unauthorized transfers and some of the transfers where a customer was tricked into sending money. [15] Even worse, the Trump administration has essentially declared open season on banks ripping off their customers by dismantling the CFPB itself. [16]

Big banks are posting massive profits, including \$15 billion for JPMorgan Chase in the second quarter of 2025. [17] They do not need to worry about consumer protection cutting into their profits anymore. Instead, President Trump's focus has been attacking the banks for their alleged bias against conservatives. The banking industry was happy to praise Trump for this, with a joint statement of support from their major trade associations. [18] As with leaving the Net Zero Banking Alliance, they know that loyalty to Trump is what keeps the gravy train flowing.

2. Despite using forced labor and human trafficking victims, the Central Romana Corporation can once again import sugar that undercuts American farmers

The Central Romana Corporation may not be a household brand in the United States, but they are one of the world's largest sugar producers and the largest landowner in the Dominican Republic. For many decades, the working and living conditions in Central Romana's fields have been notoriously awful. Many of the workers are migrants from Haiti or their descendants, often undocumented or stateless, giving them little recourse against being forced to work in terrible conditions.

Housing for Central Romana workers sometimes lacks electricity or running water. Workers and their families often go without medical care, even as the work exposes them to toxic chemicals. Pay is as little as \$4 per day. Workers are often human trafficking victims trapped in debt by the recruiters who brought them to the fields. And for years, the billionaire Fanjul family that owns the Central Romana Corporation has used their political influence in the Dominican Republic and with Republicans and Democrats in the United States to keep it this way. [19]

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) finally cracked down in 2022. CBP issued an order blocking imports of Central Romana sugar, enforcing U.S. law that prohibits the importation of goods produced with forced labor. CBP identified five separate indications of forced labor in Central Romana's fields: "abuse of vulnerability, isolation, withholding of wages, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime." [20] This law does more than protect workers, including children – it also protects American workers and businesses who cannot compete against a foreign company using dirt cheap forced labor.

Central Romana tried their usual playbook to get off the hook: lobbying and political connections. The Fanjul family pressed their connections in the Biden administration to intervene, and Central Romana spent \$1.1 million on lobbyists in 2023 and 2024. To the credit of the Biden administration, they did not reverse course. [21]

Trump and his administration did not share such scruples. The Fanjuls gave \$1 million to the Make America Great Again PAC and \$413,000 to the Republican National Committee. On the same day that Trump was convicted of 34 felony charges, José Fanjul hosted an exclusive fundraising dinner for Trump with his billionaire friends. [22]

In March, CBP quietly lifted the order blocking imports of Central Romana sugar. [23] This was exactly the outcome that labor rights groups worried about when they wrote to U.S. officials in 2024 warning that Central Romana's actions to lift the import ban were primarily lobbying expenditures, with only superficial changes to their labor practices. [24]

Melissa Ditmore, who authored a book on human trafficking, said it best: "This decision moves government away from regulations and the rule of law to a system ruled by whim and favors for donors, regardless of the consequences for people who work in horrifying conditions." [25]

3. Boeing criminal charges dropped for deadly plane crashes

In 2018 and 2019, 346 people were killed in two plane crashes involving the Boeing 737 MAX. When Boeing developed the 737 MAX, the company cut costs by convincing the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) not to require flight simulator training for pilots who flew earlier Boeing 737 models, despite the critical need to train airline pilots on the new and unfamiliar systems on the MAX. [26] During this process, Boeing concealed from the FAA important information about changes to a new technology called the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). As a result, pilot training materials for the 737 MAX lacked information on safely mastering that system, including for pilots in the United States.

The FAA first learned about the MCAS changes when Lion Air Flight 610 crashed near Indonesia, and ultimately the FAA grounded the 737 MAX after the crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302. The activation of this system was the central cause of both crashes. [27]

Shortly before the end of Trump's first term, the Department of Justice (DOJ) entered into a deferred prosecution agreement with Boeing to resolve criminal charges for conspiracy to defraud the United States. Boeing agreed to pay a fine and would not face prosecution as long as it enacted a stronger compliance program to prevent further acts of fraud. [28]

In 2024, the DOJ found that Boeing violated the deferred prosecution agreement, "by failing to design, implement, and enforce a compliance and ethics program to prevent

and detect violations of the U.S. fraud laws throughout its operations.”[1] This was after a door plug panel flew off a Boeing 737 MAX inflight, forcing the Alaska Airlines flight to return to the airport with fortunately no serious injuries. The National Transportation Safety Board determined that this was likely caused by, “Boeing’s failure to provide adequate training, guidance, and oversight.” [30]

Boeing was prepared to plead guilty. But after Trump took office, Boeing executives realized they could get a better deal. [31] Boeing has always been a prolific spender on lobbying and political donations to buy influence with both parties, [32] and the corporation turned those efforts towards the Trump administration with a \$1 million donation to his inauguration. [33]

Boeing’s CEO even traveled to Qatar with Trump when the president took his corruption to an even more flagrant level by accepting the gift of a luxury Boeing 747 from the Qatari royal family. [34] And to make sure to stay on President Trump’s good side, Boeing dropped some of its workplace diversity efforts. [35]

Boeing’s corrupt alliance with Trump worked. The DOJ is now asking the court to approve a new deal where Boeing would not plead guilty – they would instead pay another fine and compensation to the families whose loved ones died in the crashes. [36] Boeing and the executives responsible for its deadly choices face no real accountability, because they play by a different set of rules than ordinary citizens in our legal system.

The victims’ families overwhelmingly oppose the new deal for Boeing. As one of their attorneys said, “This isn’t justice. It’s a backroom deal dressed up as a legal proceeding, and it sends a dangerous message: In America, the rich and powerful can buy their way out of accountability.” [37]

4. BitMEX lets hackers launder stolen cryptocurrency, gets pardoned by Trump

Big crypto corporations and their executives know that the Trump administration will always protect their interests after they donated so heavily to his campaign. And Trump and his family got in on the action themselves. [38] Lost amid the hype is that the Trump administration will not hesitate to leave ordinary crypto investors in the lurch when that is what it takes to protect the industry’s powerful elites, of which they are now a part.

Trump demonstrated this with the first-ever presidential pardon for a corporation in American history, [39] for the crypto exchange BitMEX and several of its top executives. [40] For years, BitMEX flouted laws against money laundering. The company allowed users to trade on the platform anonymously by providing only an email address and advertised these lax controls to get more business.

That was great for hackers who steal crypto from legitimate investors. Hackers used BitMEX to secretly trade their stolen crypto so the proceeds of the trades would appear

to come from honest investments. [41] Regular people trying to invest in crypto lost everything, and BitMEX profited when the thieves used their exchange to launder the money.

Cryptocurrency hacks are just one of the harms that come from platforms like BitMEX enabling money laundering. For crime to be profitable, the criminal needs a way to use their money in the regular economy. [42] Money laundering makes criminal proceeds appear to be from a legitimate source – vital to the operations of drug cartels, cyber criminals, terrorists, and gangs. That is why money laundering is a crime, and why it is a crime for financial institutions to operate without controls to stop money laundering.

In 2020, during Trump’s first term, federal prosecutors charged BitMEX executives with breaking anti-money laundering laws. [43] During the Biden administration, BitMEX and several of its founders pled guilty to violating the Bank Secrecy Act, and a federal judge sentenced them to fines and probation, including a \$100 million fine to BitMEX. [44]

Trump’s pardon for BitMEX specifies that any fines against BitMEX are to be remitted back to the company – a nine-figure check from the government to BitMEX. [45] BitMEX’s founders celebrated the pardon as a vindication that they never did anything wrong in the first place. [46]

By using America’s first-ever presidential pardon of a corporation to help the crypto industry, Trump showed the powerful crypto tycoons who are in his inner circle that his government is on their side. These are powerful corporate interests for Trump to appease. Public Citizen calculates that nearly half of all the corporate spending in the 2024 campaign came from the crypto industry, and after the election, the Trump administration dropped enforcement actions against 20 crypto companies. [47] For crypto corporations breaking the law, crypto hackers, and criminals everywhere seeking to launder their money, this literal corporate pardon makes crime pay again.

5. Toyota scams car buyers and keeps profit

Buying a car is notoriously stressful, especially with added costs for products like vehicle service agreements that only come up when the buyer is signing the final paperwork. Customers are overwhelmed by the obscure terms of use for these products and sometimes do not even know they are optional, or simply decide later they are not a good deal. Toyota knew that every dollar its customers saved from canceling those products was a dollar fewer in profits, but instead of improving their terms or making an honest sales pitch, the corporation illegally trapped those customers by withholding refunds and making it exceedingly hard to cancel. [48]

When customers tried to call Toyota and cancel over the phone, they were directed to a “retention hotline” where Toyota representatives would try to talk them out of cancelling. This would go on until the customer said three times that they wanted to cancel. After that, Toyota would tell the customer that they could not cancel over the phone. The cancellation request needed to be submitted in writing. Toyota routed more than 118,000

customer calls to this sham hotline.

If a customer managed to cancel one of these products, Toyota would sometimes still withhold, delay, or incorrectly calculate the refund they were owed. Toyota also damaged the credit of their customers by falsely telling credit reporting agencies that their account was delinquent.

The CFPB put a stop to Toyota's scam in 2023. Toyota agreed to pay \$48 million to affected customers, after years of dodging customers trying to get refunds. Toyota also agreed to pay a \$12 million fine to the CFPB's victims relief fund that compensates other victims of financial wrongdoing who cannot otherwise get their money back. And Toyota agreed to stop its illegal practices, including by making it easy for customers to cancel and ensuring that dealerships only sign people up for these products when they actually want them. [49]

Like other powerful corporations, Toyota saw an opportunity to buy their way into the incoming Trump administration by donating \$1 million to his inauguration. [50] It was a good investment. In May, the Trump administration quietly released Toyota from all the obligations from its settlement with the CFPB.

Most importantly, that means Toyota no longer has to pay refunds to the customers they screwed. The order from CFPB Acting Director Russell Vought goes out of its way to make that clear.

6. Hewlett Packard Enterprise buys out Juniper Networks to illegally gain market power to raise prices and the government lets them

Hospitals, universities, and businesses rely on a wireless local area network (WLAN) for things like medical records and payment processing. Two companies have historically dominated the market for selling these WLAN systems: Cisco and Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE). However, Juniper Networks was a fast-growing rival bringing new competition to the sector, which drove innovation and discounted prices. Rather than competing with Juniper Networks, HPE paid \$14 billion to buy them out. As a result, just two companies will control over 70 percent of the WLAN market in the United States.

Mergers are illegal when they substantially lessen competition, as this merger does, and the result will be higher prices and less innovation. That conclusion and all the facts in the prior paragraph come from the lawsuit filed by the Department of Justice to block the merger on January 30, 2025 – after Trump took office. [52]

The federal government had become much more aggressive in fighting corporate monopolies under President Biden, and some believed that this populist approach would continue under Trump. [53] The move to block the HPE-Juniper Networks merger was an early ray of hope this might be the case.

Instead, the Trump administration has made it abundantly clear that the way to get

mergers approved and avoid anti-monopoly scrutiny is not to follow the law – it's to hire the right lobbyists and make corrupt backroom deals.

HPE hired lobbyists with close connections to Trump, particularly Mike Davis and Arthur Schwartz, who have made a lucrative business of selling their insider access to the Trump administration. [54] Their strategy began to work as DOJ's antitrust team came under intense political pressure to drop their lawsuit and approve the merger.

However, this corrupt strategy risked backfiring as Trump-appointed DOJ antitrust leaders chafed at the involvement of lobbyists who were involved for their political connections rather than antitrust expertise. [55] One of these Trump appointees, Roger Alford, testified before Congress about, "the crushing burden of corporate lobbyists seeking public favor to distort the marketplace." [56] Another Trump antitrust appointee, Bill Rinner, insisted that, "We do not plan to hash out merger settlements over martinis." [57]

Yet that is exactly what happened when HPE lobbyists reportedly met with government officials for cocktails at a private club. [58] The DOJ allowed the merger to proceed – over the objections of their antitrust leadership – with only minor changes that do not address the problems raised in the Trump administration's initial lawsuit. [59] As one of just two dominant WLAN companies with Juniper Networks out of the way, HPE now has far more power to raise prices that will get passed on to patients, students, and consumers.

As for Roger Alford and Bill Rinner, they were fired for alleged insubordination. [60] After his firing, Alford gave a speech asking, "Will America be governed by the rule of law or the rule of lobbyists?" [61] He accuses corrupt DOJ officials of undermining the Trump antitrust agenda in favor of the rule of lobbyists, and hopes the Trump DOJ will change course. But the sad fact is that lobbyist-driven corporate pardons are the Trump agenda.

7. Pepsi allowed to help Walmart crush local grocers

Independent grocery stores are closing around the country, driving up food prices by reducing competition and leaving many communities without any nearby grocery store. These "food deserts" may appear to be a natural consequence of poverty or rural life, but they are actually a modern phenomenon. Grocery stores used to be far more present in working-class neighborhoods and rural communities. [62] And it may seem that big box stores crush local grocers simply because they are more efficient, but that is not the case either. [63]

What is happening instead is that giant corporations like Walmart and dollar store chains use the power that comes from their size to rig the system against the competition. They make special deals with suppliers so that they pay less than their smaller competitors for the same products, and suppliers go along with it since they rely on big box stores for so much of their sales. [64]

To understand how the government lets these giant corporations rig the system against

local businesses, take the case of R.F. Buche, who owns a chain of grocery stores in South Dakota. He reported earlier this year that Walmart was selling eggs for \$3.47 while the best price he could get for the same eggs was \$4.01. The situation was similar for cereal and soda. That is not efficiency, and it is certainly not lower markups, since the \$4.01 price is before any retail markup to cover the costs of Buche's stores. Walmart and its suppliers have made it impossible for Buche's stores to compete on price. [65]

As a result, customers and communities lose. As the National Grocers Association notes, "Suppliers pay dearly for the privilege of doing business with these massive corporations, and the cost gets passed on to everyone else." [66] It makes independent grocery stores more expensive places to shop, and big chains can add higher retail markups or cut back on store locations and customer service when there is less competition. Customers are powerless to choose to shop elsewhere after their community's locally-owned businesses are crushed out of existence.

None of this is legal. The Robinson-Patman Antidiscrimination Act prohibits suppliers from charging small businesses more than big chain stores for the same products. [67] Volume discounts are allowed when they are connected to actual cost savings, but if a supplier is selling by the truckload to a big box store for a certain price, then other retailers like Buche's stores who can also buy by the truckload are supposed to get the same price.

The Robinson-Patman Act was not enforced for decades – hence the rise of food deserts – but that finally changed at the end of the Biden administration. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) sued Pepsi for giving special treatment to Walmart at the expense of other retailers and ultimately, consumers. [68] Pepsi products are important goods for grocery competition – they are widely purchased and it is easy for customers to compare prices.

Pepsi and Walmart both donated to Trump's inauguration. [69] Both corporations also recognized that they would need to walk back company policies that might look like dissent from the Trump agenda, which they did by publicly claiming to roll back their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. [70]

After Trump took office and illegally fired two Democratic FTC Commissioners, the FTC dropped the case against Pepsi. [71] After it looked like help was finally on the way, the situation will only get worse for local grocers. The loss runs deep when communities lose their grocery store. As Buche says, "If I go out of that town, who's sponsoring ball teams anymore? Who's helping with the church bazaar? Who's providing employment?" [72]

8. Big oil executive rewarded for trying to coordinate with OPEC to raise prices

Scott Sheffield is a major figure in the oil industry and an extremely wealthy executive. But when his company Pioneer Natural Resources sought to merge with Exxon, the FTC's review discovered extensive efforts by Sheffield to collude with other oil producers, including the countries in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)

cartel, to hold back production in order to raise prices. Higher prices mean more profits for big oil companies, at the expense of drivers paying more at the pump.

Sheffield's collusion efforts were wide ranging both in public and in private. The FTC review turned up hundreds of text messages and WhatsApp conversations that it determined were seeking to coordinate the production of American oil companies and OPEC countries. Sheffield publicly declared, "If Texas leads the way, maybe we can get OPEC to cut production. Maybe Saudi and Russia will follow." He even went so far as to say, "I was using the tactics of OPEC+ to get a bigger OPEC+ done." [73]

Colluding to raise prices is illegal, and under the terms of the merger, Sheffield would continue to be a powerful force in the oil industry as a member of Exxon's Board of Directors. The FTC was not going to let that happen. The FTC's approval of the merger, agreed to by Exxon, stipulated that Sheffield would not be allowed to serve on Exxon's board or in a different advisory role. This was a huge story in the oil industry, where it sent a powerful message that the collusive behavior that had become a normal business practice for executives like Sheffield would no longer be tolerated. [74]

Oil is the Sheffield family's business, and just 18 days after the FTC's order against Scott Sheffield, his son Bryan got to work buying politicians to make this go away. [75] Bryan Sheffield had donated to Republicans before, including Nikki Haley earlier in 2024, but he had never donated to Trump. That changed in a big way with an \$844,600 donation to the Trump 47 Committee. [76]

After Trump took control of the FTC, one of the agency's first actions was to reopen Scott Sheffield's case. [77] After reopening the case, the FTC rescinded the restrictions against Sheffield in its prior final order. [78] Rather than lowering prices, as President Trump claimed he would do, his administration rewarded a big oil executive for colluding to raise prices.

Sheffield retains his power in the oil industry as one of Exxon's largest individual shareholders. But he says he is not joining the Exxon board. Sheffield is mad at Exxon for agreeing to the FTC's earlier order. He insists he did nothing wrong. [79]

Conclusion

The rule of law sounds like an abstract ideal, but what it means is that the law should apply to everyone equally, even when the most powerful corporations victimize the most powerless people. The United States has never lived up to that promise. Even so, the goal has always mattered as a way for citizens to hold government accountable when it strays from that ideal.

Trump's use of corporate pardons makes it clear that the rule of law has no place in his administration. It also plainly shows he cares little for the citizens who need and deserve a more equal seat at the table to combat the ways corporate influence robs them of their own money and power. Instead, Trump seeks to rule the government by personal favor, bestowed upon the billionaires and corporations who strengthen his grip on power.

Corporate pardons mean that the law does not bind the billionaires and corporations who join Trump in taking over the government. For the same reason, corporate pardons also mean that the law does not protect you from the billionaires and corporations in Trump's inner circle.

So, what can we do to fight back? First, we should not give in to hopeless cynicism. Government corruption and excessive corporate power were problems before Trump, but it used to at least be possible to hold corporations accountable, as was happening to varying degrees in each of the eight cases profiled in this report. We should not accept Trump's corrupt system as inevitable, just as we should not accept the corrupt corporate power that predated Trump. Unrigging the economy and unrigging our democracy should be at the core of how we fight back against the Trump administration, so that we can present a better alternative to the people who have rightly been frustrated and disillusioned with the direction of our country over the years.

We can pass legislation that shifts power from big corporations to workers and citizens. When regular people have more power in the economy, corporations cannot take advantage of them so easily in the first place. And when corporations have less power in our democracy, they cannot shirk accountability with corporate pardons when they do break the law.

There are lots of big ways we can do this. To build worker power, we can pass bills like the PRO Act and other legislation that tilts the playing field towards workers building power together with a union. We could pass my bipartisan Workforce Mobility Act, which limits the use of non-compete clauses or the Empowering App-Based Workers Act, new legislation I introduced with Senator Schatz to improve transparency on how app companies operate and help boost wages for rideshare drivers and delivery app workers. To reduce excessive corporate power, we could strengthen our laws against monopolies by passing great bills in Congress that I cosponsor—like the Competition and Antitrust Law Enforcement Reform Act, or the Preventing Algorithmic Collusion Act. And we should do whatever it takes to get corporate money out of politics and stop government corruption. That includes bills that explicitly combat corruption in the Trump

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administration such as my MEME Act, which would prevent federal officials from using their position to profit off digital assets such as meme coins.

Even when the Trump administration blocks legislation to shift power from corporations to the people, mass mobilization and organized pushback matter. At times, when the Trump administration and Congressional Republicans face major popular rejection for their agenda, that has forced them to back down. After House Republicans inserted a moratorium on AI regulation by states into their budget bill, Senate Republicans joined Democrats to remove the provision after it drew massive blowback. [80] Public opposition also pressured the Trump administration to reverse some of the most disruptive cuts that Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency was making to the Social Security Administration. [81]

The federal government is not the only place to fight back against corporate pardons. States can step in to enforce their own laws when the Trump administration lets a corporation off the hook. For example, New York Attorney General Letitia James is going after Zelle for enabling the massive fraud that is no longer being pursued by the CFPB. [82] Journalists play a vital role in uncovering the corrupt details of corporate pardons, as with the DOJ's backroom deal to approve the HPE/Juniper merger. Public support for independent media is more important than ever.

Finally, we should not tolerate the most powerful corporations in the world backing the destruction of the rule of law, just because it is an opportunity for them to grab some extra money for themselves. When universities, law firms, and media organizations have come under attack from the Trump administration, the ones that capitulated to lawless demands have rightly seen their public reputations crumble.

We should stand up for companies that are doing business the right way, and think less of corporations acting like oligarchs in Trump's authoritarian takeover. We should not shy away, during or after the Trump administration, from naming and shaming bad corporate actors and the corrupt government officials who are in their pocket.

Corporate pardons are just one of the ways that Trump is replacing democracy and rule of law with authoritarian power and rule by personal favor. If we are going to save our democracy, we need to act now.

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