

Layoffs at the Department of Justice are transforming its workforce

A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

The Justice Department fired more than 200 people this year. Many others have been forced out of their jobs for reasons that seem political. Those departures are transforming the workforce. Here's NPR's Carrie Johnson.

CARRIE JOHNSON, BYLINE: On a recent afternoon near Washington, Erez Reuveni opens a big box on the table and reflects on his career at the Justice Department.

(SOUNDBITE OF PAPER CRINKLING)

EREZ REUVENI: There's a box of my various awards.

JOHNSON: Reuveni spent nearly 15 years as an immigration lawyer at the DOJ, winning big cases in President Trump's first term in office.

REUVENI: Special commendation presented to Erez Reuveni for outstanding service in the Civil Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, protecting the nation from foreign terrorist entry, executive order litigation team. This is the travel ban.

JOHNSON: He even got promoted this year to oversee about 100 lawyers working on immigration, the top priority for the Trump administration. But three weeks later, Reuveni was fired after telling a judge a migrant had been deported by mistake. Reuveni says the White House wanted to know why he didn't call that migrant a terrorist.

REUVENI: The president can lie publicly if he chooses to, or she chooses to. I can't do that. Career attorneys can't do that. But we are still expected to go to court and parrot these similar talking points that have no basis in law and have no support.

JOHNSON: Reuveni went on to file a whistleblower complaint. He claims a Justice Department official told him and others they might have to blow off court orders and mislead judges in deportation cases.

REUVENI: It is just one of the sacrosanct assumptions of rule of law. A court issues an order, you respect that order. And if you don't like it, you appeal it.

JOHNSON: The official who allegedly made that remark, Emil Bove, has denied telling anyone to disobey court orders. This week, the Senate voted to confirm him as a federal appeals court judge. Reuveni is currently unemployed.

REUVENI: I mean, what happened to me was outrageous. And I felt so strongly about what was happening at DOJ, what had happened to me, what is happening to my colleagues. But really just, in just a matter of weeks, an institution that's been the pillar of defending the rule of law for over a century is just completely torn down.

JOHNSON: Max Stier leads the Partnership for Public Service. It's a nonprofit group that promotes better government and stronger democracy.

MAX STIER: What is happening at the Department of Justice is deeply concerning, not just for the lawyers that are there, but for all Americans.

JOHNSON: Stier is also an alumni of DOJ. And he's been watching this year with alarm.

STIER: We now have a president and people who work for him who are directing federal employees to do what the president wants even if that is in conflict with the law or in conflict with our Constitution.

JOHNSON: Attorney General Pam Bondi and Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche used to be personal lawyers for President Trump, defending him against charges filed by the Justice Department under the Biden administration. In public remarks this year, they've promised to change course at the DOJ and end what they call weaponization of law enforcement. Here's Bondi at an event this year introducing the president.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PAM BONDI: We all work for the greatest president in the history of our country. We are so proud to work at the directive of Donald Trump. It is...

(APPLAUSE)

BONDI: He will never stop fighting for us. And we will never stop fighting for him and for our country.

JOHNSON: On her first day in office, Bondi issued a memo requiring Justice Department lawyers to provide zealous representation of the U.S. government. The memo said any lawyer who declines to sign a brief, appear in court or otherwise delays DOJ's mission will face discipline up to and including termination.

As many as 4,700 workers may have already left the Justice Department this year, according to budget documents and interviews. That's a combination of firings, forced resignations and people running for the hills. Entire units, including the Civil Rights Division and the group that defends federal programs, have been hollowed out. Stacey Young runs Justice Connection, a nonprofit that helps DOJ workers find legal and ethics help.

STACEY YOUNG: The harm that we're going to feel from these attacks on DOJ, it's going to be felt for years, possibly generations.

JOHNSON: Carrie Johnson, NPR News, Washington.