Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 11, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write to condemn the Department of Defense's (DoD) recent memorandum stripping collective bargaining rights from 300,000 DoD employees, including more than 1,400 civilian defense workers at Fort Drum and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) in Rome, New York in addition to nearly 800 civilian employees at Watervliet Arsenal in New York's Capital Region.

On April 9th, you unilaterally rescinded the collective bargaining agreements for Department of Defense employees, turning your back on the very civil servants who play a critical role in supporting our national security. These workers—many of whom have dedicated decades of service to the American people, including by previously serving in the military—support the readiness of our armed forces, manage essential financial operations, and sustain mission critical Department of Defense infrastructure and support elements. Stripping these employees of their collective bargaining rights undermines not only their workplace protections, but also the stability, morale, and effectiveness of the civilian workforce that our military depends on so our servicemembers—especially those who are forward deployed—can focus on their warfighting missions.

We urge you to immediately reverse course, restore these collective bargaining agreements, and reaffirm your commitment to respecting the rights and contributions of the civilian workforce that underpins our national defense.

Civilian-run operations at Fort Drum, and DFAS Rome, and Watervliet Arsenal are indispensable to our national defense and ability to maintain a high readiness posture. At DFAS Rome, about 800 civil servants provide critical financial services to our Armed Forces, from payroll and vendor payments to facilities sustainment and reimbursement for Permanent Change of Station (PCS) costs. As one of five main DFAS sites, the Rome site has provided finance and accounting services exclusively to DoD for more than 30 years, directly supporting military readiness by managing, processing and auditing financial records for DoD personnel and managing all financial aspects of DoD operations from payrolls to foreign military sales (FMS). Fort Drum has the largest in-house Directorate of Public Works (DPW) in the U.S. Army consisting of more than 300 civilian employees, all of whom directly support Fort Drum soldiers and families and the mission readiness of the 10th Mountain Division, the most deployed regular unit in the U.S. Army. Lastly, Watervliet Arsenal—the oldest continuously active arsenal in the United States—has been operated almost entirely by its civilian workforce for the last 212 years, making possible the surge production of countless artillery weapon systems.

Undermining collective bargaining protections for these workers directly threatens the stability and reliability of these mission-critical support functions. When workplace protections are stripped away, it creates uncertainty, lowers morale, and increases the risk of workforce attrition in highly specialized roles that cannot be easily or quickly replaced. The consequences are not abstract. Delays in payroll processing could mean servicemembers and their families go without timely pay. Disruptions in vendor payments could stall maintenance contracts, further delaying critical repairs to warfighting equipment and facilities. Breakdowns in reimbursement systems could hinder troop mobility, slowing deployments and reassignments at a time when agility and precision are essential.

At a time when our military must remain agile and prepared to respond to emerging operational threats, any actions that destabilize DoD's 715,000+ strong civilian workforce ultimately degrades the mission readiness of the Total Force. This order represents yet another reckless attempt by the Trump administration to erode worker protections and push experienced public servants out of federal service.

At DFAS Rome alone, nearly 200 employees have been lost since January 2025 due to the Trump administration's Deferred Resignation Program (DRP) and reductions in force (RIF), leaving the facility critically understaffed. Stripping away collective bargaining rights on top of these losses only deepens the instability, especially at a time when the Department of Defense faces an increasingly competitive labor market. We cannot afford to strip rights from civilian staff. Doing so will inevitably drive away experienced talent, undermine recruitment and retention, and degrade readiness—not only of the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, but of the entire U.S. military.

National security and labor rights are not mutually exclusive. A strong and secure nation depends on a federal workforce that has robust job protections and is treated with the respect it has earned. Thus, we urge you to immediately rescind this memorandum and continue to recognize the collective bargaining agreements for the civil servants at Fort Drum, Rome, Watervliet Arsenal, and across the country. Our defense workers deserve the same respect and commitment to fairness that they show in service to our country every day.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

John W. Mannion
Member of Congress

Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress