

Who Will Pay for Health Care?

By [Shamus Cooke](#)

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There's a jumbled, increasingly hysterical tone to the health care debate going on in Washington. On each side of the uproar lie powerful and opposing interests: on one side the giant corporations who make billions of dollars via the status quo; and on the other, the majority of working people who suffer immensely from it.

Creating a health care "compromise" between these two interests is of course impossible, but seeing the politicians in Congress attempt one is at least good entertainment.

And although neither party within the two-party system represents the interests of working people, they nonetheless understand the immense importance of health care for the vast majority of Americans, and the political/social effects another major letdown will have. They are thus begrudgingly forced to consider the desires of ordinary people.

This desire, however, becomes mutated in Congress, especially after corporate lobbyists finish tampering with it. Therefore, a nationalized single-payer system such as Canada and England have — the type most desired by working people here in the U.S. — is "off the table," and all kinds of rotten "compromises" have flooded the debate.

These compromises are varied and vague at this point, ranging from a competing government plan to a radical-sounding but worthless "co-op" plan and finally to a number of less impressive ideas that will change absolutely nothing.

The virtual silencing of single-payer was the first major victory for the status quo, led by the private health insurance companies, but they have more battles to fight. Not only at issue is the type of compromise but the more important question looms in the background: "Who pays for it?"

Again, there are only two payees: either the corporations and the super wealthy who own them, or everybody else. This fact underlies every proposal on how to pay for health care, unleashing fiery passions on both sides.

For example, Obama initially put forth the idea of partially paying for health care through limiting tax deductions for the super wealthy, but Republicans and Democrats alike screamed "NO!" Tax deductions are but one of the ways the super rich hide their huge wealth from the government, and the politicians they fund with these savings are in the process of either watering down this proposal or killing it.

Obama backed off.

Other funding sources were thus needed. Democrats then demanded that workers

organized into unions should help offset the costs. How? The idea is that those workers fortunate enough to receive health care benefits through their work will be taxed for them. This is yet another attempt of members of the status-quo to paint union members as “privileged,” so as to focus the angst of non-union members towards organized ones — an obvious divide and conquer tactic.

Although when campaigning for office Obama claimed to be against such a tax on health care benefits, he has now backed off a unilateral rejection of this idea. Those close to him — aides and senators — have indicated this fact and the Wall Street Journal noted:

“The president may well be attracted to the dollars of a [health care] benefit tax, but he’s waiting to see if he can blame Congress for dragging him into it.” (June 12, 2009)

The short-sighted officials of the national labor unions loudly condemned the health care-benefits tax, while remaining silent on the other tax proposals that also target workers.

Bloomberg explains: “Lawmakers have a plethora of proposals to raise the hundreds of billions estimated to be needed for an [health care] overhaul, including new taxes on soda, beer, and wine...” (June 7, 2009).

Gas, cigarettes, and numerous other products that would disproportionately affect working people are also being considered for taxation.

Most recently, the health care debate has shifted focus again: away from the super rich and organized labor, and towards the lower paid sections of the working class. Obama has suddenly discovered an untapped reservoir of wealth:

“... the administration expects to lower payments [Medicare and Medicaid] to hospitals that treat large numbers of low-income patients.” (New York Times, June 1, 2009)

In the same article a doctor responded to Obama’s idea:

“What about homeless people, the chronically mentally ill, substance abusers and people with low literacy? You think they will be using the federal health insurance exchange to enroll in insurance plans? I don’t think so.”

Another critic mentioned in the article claimed the plan could be “devastating to hospitals that serve inner-city communities.”

The health care debate has traveled quite a distance, all in a downhill direction: from the starting point of a universal single-payer system to the very bottom of the hill — taxing workers health care benefits and taking health care away from the neediest. This is the obvious outcome of corporate interests having a “seat at the table” in deciding health care policy.

One thing is clear: if working people do not collectively stand up and demand that the very wealthy pay for health care, they will end up paying for it themselves. The raw material for a powerful health care movement already exists in the tens of million Americans who suffer from the current system. With its resources and organizational capacity, the nation’s labor unions have an important role in helping such a movement take shape. But phone calls and letters to Senators won’t do the trick.

Without the hot breath of mass protests on their neck, the Democrats will do whatever their corporate sponsors tell them to. And this is the more important point: there is no clearer proof that the Democratic Party is an organization controlled by powerful corporate interests. Working people — now more than ever — need their own independent political organization if they want a chance to pursue their interests.

Shamus Cooke is a social service worker, trade unionist, and writer for Workers Action (www.workerscompass.org). He can be reached at shamuscook@yahoo.com

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