

Single-payer government health care bill gains union backers

By **MARK GRUENBERG**
WASHINGTON, D.C. — A bill establishing a government-run Canadian-style single-payer health care system for the U.S., built on Medicare, is gaining union backers.

The measure, H.R. 676 by Rep. John

Conyers (D-Mich.), would eliminate the private, for-profit health insurance industry by establishing a government-run system.

The "United States National Health Insurance Act" would be funded through the federal budget, says a fact

sheet from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which covers health issues.

Momentum for Conyers' bill comes just after the Massachusetts Legislature voted to require every state resident to buy insurance.

Republican Gov. Mitt Romney, who plans to seek his party's presidential nomination, signed the bill, but used his line-item veto to axe its provisions that required corporations to pay their fair share of health care insurance. That prompted AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to say "it is simply ridiculous" for Romney to "try to solve Massachusetts' health care problems by dumping them on the backs of working people."

"An individual mandate to buy insurance can only work if it is paired with a guarantee of affordable, comprehensive coverage, and the legislation falls dangerously short of that goal," Sweeney added.

He said the result is that a single worker earning \$28,000 a year would have to pay \$350 a month — or 15 percent of pre-tax income — for health insurance. Health care now takes slightly more than one-sixth of U.S. gross domestic product — the measurement of the value of all goods and services in the country.

The latest backers of Conyers' bill were United Auto Workers Local 1155 in Birmingham, Alabama; Machinists Lodge 1145, representing railroad machinists in Selkirk and DeWitt, NY; and American Federation of Teachers Local 2334, which represents more than 20,000 faculty and staff at City University of New York.

The Ohio legislative board of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, an affiliate of the Teamsters also endorsed the bill. The union said it will take the cause to its conference convention in June and, if it wins, to the Teamsters convention immediately afterwards.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 825, which represents bus drivers, mechanics and other workers at New Jersey Transit, also voted to ask its parent international to back Conyers' bill.

HR 676 has been endorsed by 131 union organizations, including 23 cen-

tral labor councils and two state AFL-CIO federations (Kentucky and Pennsylvania).

Conyers' bill also has 68 U.S. House co-sponsors. None are from Oregon and only Jim McDermott has co-sponsored from Washington.

But Conyers' bill may not see the light of day in the Republican-controlled Congress, which instead is considering legislation in the Senate that would supposedly help small businesses band together to get health insurance.

In reality, the AFL-CIO said, that measure, pushed by the National Federation of Independent Business, could raise the premiums on people who are insured and increase the number of the uninsured, now 46 million.

Conyers' bill would mandate comprehensive coverage of "all medically necessary services:" primary care and prevention, inpatient and outpatient care, long-term care, emergency care, mental health services, prescription drugs, durable medical equipment, full dental services (except cosmetic dentistry), substance abuse treatment, chiropractic services and basic vision care and vision correction, the summary says.

"No cost-sharing would be imposed and benefits would only be available from public or non-profit providers," it adds. "Non-profit HMOs that deliver care in their own facilities and employ clinicians on a salaried basis could participate."

And there would be no insurance premiums.

Hospitals and nursing homes would get monthly lump-sum payments while doctors and nurses would get fee-for-service payments under a negotiated fee schedule based initially on current prevailing fees or reimbursement, the foundation says.

Data from America's Agenda: Health Care For All, a group headed by former United Food and Commercial Workers President Doug Dority, shows health insurance premiums rose 60 percent since the year 2000, but "the proportion of premiums that insurers paid out for medical costs declined" in the same time.






The money went into insurers' profits and claims processing — paperwork. Other data shows private insurers spend approximately one-fifth of their revenue on overhead, including processing. Medicare — the basis for Conyers' bill — spends three percent.

Local Motion

April 2006

Union election activity in Oregon and SW Washington, according to the National Labor Relations Board and the Oregon Employment Relations Board

Elections held

| Company | Date | Union | Location | Results: | |  |
|--|------|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| | | | | Union | No Union | |
| McCabe's Quality Foods | 4/12 | Teamsters Local 162 | Portland | 11 | 39 |  |
| Lane County | 4/13 | Fed. Ore. Parole Officers | Eugene | 24 | 1 |  |
| Rural Metro of Oregon | 4/14 | Nat. Emergency Medical Services Assn. | Salem | 30 | 8 |  |
| Oregon Potato Company (decertification) | 4/14 | Teamsters Local 670 | Boardman | 20 | 21 |  |

Elections requested

| Company | Union | Location | # of employees |
|---|--|--------------|----------------|
| KINK Radio (decertification) | American Federation of Television and Radio Artists | Portland | 20 |
| General Distributors (decertification) | Teamsters Local 162 | Portland | 22 |
| KKEX 1190 AM & KPOJ 620 AM (decertification) | American Federation of Television and Radio Artists | Portland | 21 |
| City of Forest Grove (decertification) | AFSCME Council 75 | Forest Grove | 49 |
| Umatilla County (Sheriff's Department) | Umatilla County Law Enforcement Assn vs. SEIU Local 503 | Pendleton | 80 |
| Columbia County (parole and probation) | Fed. of Ore. Parole & Probation Officers vs. AFSCME Council 75 | St. Helens | 12 |
| Wasco County (parole and probation) | Fed. of Ore. Parole & Probation Officers vs. AFSCME Council 75 | The Dalles | 5 |
| Deschutes County (parole and probation) | Fed. of Ore. Parole & Probation Officers vs. AFSCME Council 75 | Bend | 16 |
| Armadillo Underground | Communications Workers of America Local 7906 | Salem | 7 |
| Beko Membrane Technology | Machinists Woodworkers District Lodge 1 | Bend | 7 |
| Center Point Graphics | Graphic Communications District Council 2 Local 747-M | Portland | 45 |
| Cove School District | Oregon School Employees Association | Cove | 11 |



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