

AFL-CIO will campaign for 'Medicare for All' to replace current insurance-run system

LAS VEGAS (PAI) — Armed with universal denunciation of the broken health care system, the national AFL-CIO Executive Council voted unanimously last month to campaign for a massive change: Expanding Medicare to the entire country.

Union leaders ranging from those representing public employees to industrial unions and construction workers with multi-employer health care plans jointly run by unions and management, blasted the present setup.

The vote puts the AFL-CIO on record with a specific universal health care plan that would involve payments from individuals, government and business — with government running it to cut administrative costs and bargain prices, just as it now runs Medicare.

It also marks a notable break from the past, as unions helped construct the present system, but watched it become increasingly and overly expensive for workers and companies — even while 47 million people are uninsured and millions more are underinsured.

Companies are dropping health care coverage for workers and retirees, and health care is the No. 1 battle in bargaining.

"The time for talking about this crisis is past," the AFL-CIO said. "All families deserve the security of a universal health care system that guarantees access based on need rather than income. Health care is a fundamental human right and an important measure of social justice."

The Executive Council statement laid down principles of universal coverage, that "government, as the voice of all of us, must play the central role in regulating, financing and providing health care," that coverage "should be accessible through the largest possible

groups to ensure coverage" for all, and that everyone — including employers — must share responsibility for health care financing.

It then said that "one concrete plan that meets the test of comprehensive, universal health coverage would build on our nation's successful universal health coverage plan for seniors: Medicare."

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"We tried to look for fundamental principles for cost-efficient, high-quality universal coverage, taking the load off employers, while we can create the largest pool" of clients "and have government play the lead role," said Leo Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers Union and chair of the federation's Legislation Committee.

After lauding Medicare, which has the federal government provide universal coverage paid for through payroll taxes, and with seniors having a choice of doctors, the AFL-CIO adds expanding it to all "would require updating and expanding Medicare benefits to fit the working population and children, as well as negotiating prices with physicians and providers that families and the country can afford."

In passing the resolution, the AFL-CIO rejected the Bush Administration's scheme to tax workers who get what Bush calls "gold-plated" health insurance. Bush would tax those plans, pushing many companies to dump them.

"Until comprehensive national reform is enacted, we will continue to defend health benefits workers have fought and sacrificed to establish over the last 50 years," the AFL-CIO said. While the union leaders did not endorse any specific bill to change the nation's health care system, AFL-CIO health care policy specialist Gerald Shea said several fit its proposal.

They include the single-payer government-run health care system bill (HR 676) by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Medicare-for-all bills crafted by Senate Labor Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), House Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) and House Health Subcommittee Chairman Pete Stark (D-Calif.).

"Conyers would put single-payer in place, while the others would build on Medicare," Shea said. Those other bills would extend Medicare to the whole country, but still leave a role for private insurers, said Walter and Kay Tillow, who handle communications for the Louisville-based Nurses Professional Organization/All-Unions Committee for Single-Payer Health Care.

That group has convinced at least

four international unions, including the Steelworkers, the Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Plumbers and Pipefitters United Association, to back HR 676. Some 220 other unions-groups back Conyers' bill.

The Tillows said they welcome the national AFL-CIO statement as "a big advance" over the present system, but criticized leaving a role for the private insurers.

Shea said the key to the federation's getting support for extending Medicare to all is to recruit some employers. Employers in the aerospace, telecommunications, steel and paper industries have talked to their unions about backing the Medicare-for-all plan, but nothing has been put in writing.

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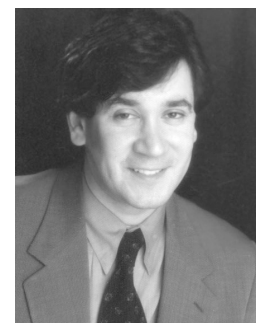
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