

Mass rally urges senators to back public health option

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Declaring Congress must listen to the voters, and not the health insurance companies, thousands of health care advocates demanded universal, affordable health care at a mass rally at the nation's Capital June 25.

The crowd, featuring more than 1,000 Communications Workers of America legislative conference delegates decked out in red "We demand Health Care Now!" T-shirts, later converged on Capitol Hill to lobby for affordable health care.

Other unionists at the rally were from Steelworkers, Laborers (in orange), Seafarers, The Newspaper Guild, Office and Professional Employees, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, United Food and Commercial Workers (in yellow), National Educa-

tion Association (in blue), Service Employees (in purple), Teamsters, Iron Workers, AFSCME (in green), and Bricklayers. Advocates from almost 200 other groups nationwide chimed in, as some came from as far as Portland.

The system they advocate, which is being pushed by the Democratic Obama Administration and hammered out in key congressional committees, features universal coverage, medical cost controls, consumer choice of doctors, a government-run Medicare-like alternative to the health insurers, and that the cost not be shouldered by taxing workers for their present insurance.

"All of us in the labor movement know we can't just take care of health care at the bargaining table. The bargaining table is being crushed by rising health care costs," said CWA President

Larry Cohen.

Some in the crowd campaigned for HR 676, government-run universal health care, with total abolition of the private insurers, their high co-pays and premiums, refusal of care, huge profits and tons of paperwork.

"We are here; we're not going away. We voted for change a few months ago. We expect change. And if we don't get it, there's going to be more change," said Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean.

Success on health care reform is a must for Democrats, Dean told The Hill newspaper. "I think it's going to be a catastrophic problem for the Democratic Party if they can't get this bill out."

Sen. Sherrod Brown, (D-Ohio) told the throng, "We're counting on you to

go across the street" to the Capitol "and convince and persuade and cajole and cajole" lawmakers to enact universal health care this year. The special interests will not hijack this process. We must have a strong public option."

Service Employees International Union Secretary-Treasurer Anna Burger said her members see the impact of lack of health care coverage in the nation's emergency rooms daily.

"People are more worried about their medical bills than about the illnesses they have to treat," Burger said. The insurers "have bean-counters and paper-pushers telling people what they can't get."

AFSCME President Gerry McEntee warned the crowd about the controversy over paying the nation's health care bill. Congressional panels are wrestling with

an estimated \$1 trillion cost over 10 years of the health care overhaul. Overall, health care consumes \$2.5 trillion a year, one-sixth of overall U.S. output. At least 20 percent of that health care cost goes for insurers' overhead, profits and paperwork.

"Taxing health care benefits is the wrong way" to pay for health care, McEntee said. "The right way is, first, to start by taxing the wealthy, and second, by closing corporate loopholes."

In their lobbying after the rally, unionists warned lawmakers that if workers must pay taxes on their present health benefits, they and the labor movement will turn against the health care legislation.

Obama doesn't favor taxing health benefits, and he continues to support a public option. In making a case for the public option, Obama has said, "If private insurers say that the marketplace provides the best quality health care, if they tell us that they're offering a good deal, then why is it that the government, which they say can't run anything, suddenly is going to drive them out of business? That's not logical."

At the rally, Dean said the public option "is the compromise position. That's going to be the difference between real reform and a bill that doesn't do anything."

The Republican Party and Big Business are against the public option — and much of the rest of Obama's plan.

Support grows for single payer health care bill

Northwest Oregon Labor Council the latest union group to back HR 676

The largest central labor council in Oregon has endorsed House Resolution 676, the single-payer health care bill introduced by Michigan Congressman John Conyers.

Delegates to the Northwest Oregon Labor Council voted June 22 to back the bill. The resolution was brought to the council by affiliates United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48.

The endorsement wasn't unanimous, as a delegate representing Teamsters Joint Council No 37 voted against it.

HR 676 would institute a single-payer health care system by expanding the Medicare system to all U.S. citizens. The system would cover every person for all necessary medical care, including prescription drugs, hospital, surgical, outpatient services, primary and preventive care, emergency services, dental, mental health, home health, physical therapy, rehabilitation (including for substance abuse), vision care, hearing services including hearing aids, chiropractic, durable medical equipment, palliative care, and long term care.

Its sponsors say HR 676 would end deductibles and co-payments, saving hundreds of billions annually by eliminating the high overhead and profits of the private health insurance industry and HMOs.

HR 676 has 93 House co-sponsors, in addition to Conyers. Jim McDermott of Seattle is the only congressman from the Pacific Northwest supporting the bill.

HR 676 has the backing of 541 union organizations in 49 states, including the Oregon AFL-CIO and Washington State Labor Council.

NOLC is the 128th central labor council nationwide to endorse the legislation. Also on board in Oregon are the Southern Oregon Labor Council; Central Oregon Labor Council; and Marion, Polk, and Yamhill Counties Central Labor Council.


Nineteen international unions are backing the bill, including United Steelworkers of America; United Auto

Workers; National Education Association; International Longshore and Warehouse Union; National Association of Letter Carriers; Machinists; Plumbers and Fitters; American Federation of Musicians; Sheet Metal Workers; Office and Professional Employees; American Federation of Teachers; Service Employees International Union; American Federation of State, County

and Municipal Employees; California Nurses Association; Communications Workers of America; Utility Workers Union of America; International Federation of Professional and Technical Employees; United Transportation Union; and United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.

For more about the bill, go to: www.unionsforsinglepayer.org.

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