

...Health care: Canadian-style

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the health care system run by the Department of Veterans Affairs; they get their health care directly from government-employed doctors in government-owned hospitals.

So government is involved in health care, just not in a way that ensures comprehensive coverage or that gives consumers adequate protection from insurance company practices. Health spending is expected to account for 17.6 percent of the U.S. economy in 2009. Yet according to the most recent data, 45 million Americans are uninsured. Above all, that's because health insurance is unaffordable. Premiums for employer-sponsored family health insurance averaged \$12,680 in 2008, and have more than doubled since 1999.

This works out well for insurance companies. Health Care for America Now — an advocacy group supported by the AFL-CIO and unions of the Change to Win labor federation — reports that profits at 10 of the country's largest publicly traded health insurance companies rose 428 percent from 2000 to 2007. In 2008, profits at the five biggest health insurance companies totalled \$10.8 billion, and revenues totaled \$222 billion.

Jim Sinclair, president of the British Columbia Labor Federation, said he has been following closely the U.S. debate over the public insurance option. And what bothers him more than anything is the endless repetition of market dogma.

"Market ideology says you can distribute health care the same way you distribute cars and wine," Sinclair

said. "The theory is that privately-provided health insurance is going to be more competitive, more efficient, and serve people better. But the fact is, it fails. A public system is better on all counts."

Sinclair points out that Canada went through the same kind of hysterical reaction when public health insurance was first introduced in Saskatchewan in 1962. Insurance companies launched a full-scale public relations assault, and doctors went on a 23-day strike during which patients died. Within a decade, public health insurance had been adopted all across Canada. It has become something no Canadian would part with, just as Medicare is regarded as politically untouchable in the United States.

Gerry Shea, government affairs assistant to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, told the Labor Press the success of the reform will depend on the details of the final bill. Shea said the AFL-CIO can support the idea of an individual mandate, in the context of shared responsibility. The logic of the individual mandate is straightforward: If people don't pay into the system when they're healthy, the system won't have the resources to pay for them when they're sick.

"We've always supported the idea that everybody participates, just like in Social Security or Medicare," Shea said.

But it won't work to require individuals to purchase coverage, and for government to subsidize the coverage,

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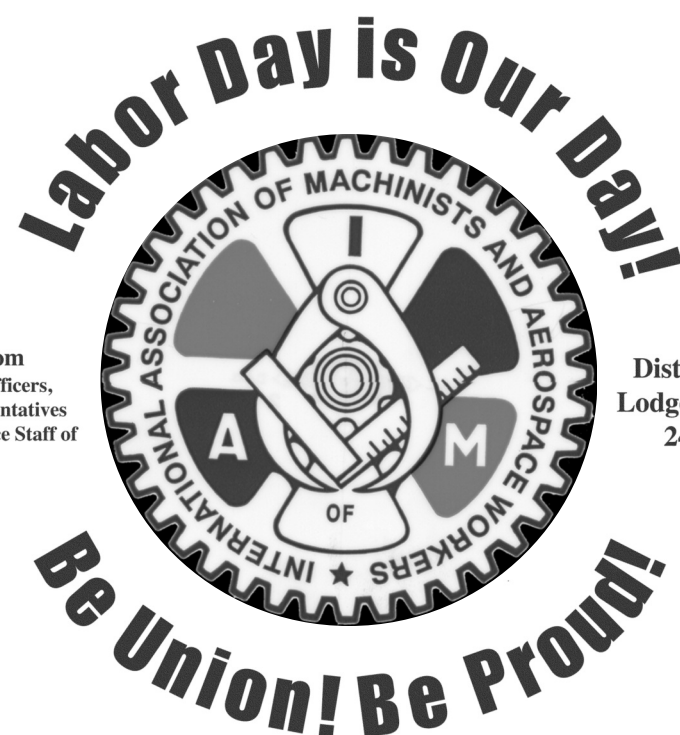
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