

UE weighs in on Washington health care proposals

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America's (UE) general executive board discussed the national debate on health care and adopted the following statement on health care reform following its May meeting:

At least since the 1940s, the UE has actively supported proposals to provide health care coverage to all in the U.S. through a national public health insurance plan. Our position was restated in UE policy adopted at the 2007 convention, "Health Care for All," and at the national level and in UE communities across the country. The UE has been an outspoken advocate of the "single-payer," Medicare-for-all solution embodied in HR676, whose primary sponsor is Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.)

For the first time in decades, the country has a presidential administration and a Congress that are working for a major overhaul of the U.S. health care system. While we are disappointed that the broadly-outlined plan under consideration by the Obama administration and the congressional leadership is not single payer, we note that it does include the creation of a public health insurance system.

Most of the plans that are supported by President Obama and leading congressional Democrats continue to rely on employer-paid health insurance through for-profit insurance companies, but also offer a public health insurance option similar to Medicare. Since the likelihood is growing that such a proposal may be adopted, we need to spell out what provisions would be acceptable to our union in such a plan, and what we would find unacceptable.

- A public plan must be open to all workers and their families, and all employers must have the option of insuring their employees through the public plan rather than private insurance.
- Premiums for the public plan must be indexed to income and affordable for working class people.
- A public plan must allow for bargaining with providers over rates for services, and over prescription drug prices.
- We reject the inclusion of "user fees" such as co-pays, deductibles and out-of-pocket expenses in a public plan.
- We oppose any effort to contract out the administration of the public plan to private profiteers.
- If we are to have a system where a public plan competes with private insurance com-

panies, consumers must be empowered to choose their coverage by evaluating objective information on the merits of each plan. Marketing must be strictly limited; companies should not be trying to lure customers through costly advertising campaigns.

- Another measure that would help to reduce health care costs is a ban on advertising of prescription drugs.
- Private health insurers must be strictly regulated. Both the public and private plans must be required to accept anyone who seeks coverage, and must provide a full range of basic health coverage.
- We are opposed to financing health care reform by taxing workers' employer-paid health insurance benefits as if these benefits were "income."
- We oppose any individual or collective mandates that would force people to buy



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private health insurance. The failed Massachusetts plan has already shown that this is unjust and unworkable.

Labor must lead this fight. Workers create the wealth that finances the system, and workers provide the services. Union activists and negotiators understand better than anyone the many tricks used by insurance companies to squeeze ever more money out of both employers and workers.

The UE is encouraging it locals and members, as well as supporters nationwide, to:

- Continue to put forward single-payer national health insurance as the best path to universal and affordable health care.
- Demand that single payer be the benchmark by which Congress and the administration measures all other proposals.
- Work with all advocates of public health insurance (both in the single-payer movement and among advocates for inclusion of a public "option" in a more modest reform plan) to build a united front that demands that health care legislation voted by Congress include a public, not-for-profit plan, open to all, that is structured to provide comprehensive health care at the lowest possible cost. ■

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