

The Push for a Medicare-for-All Plan

America's complex and inefficient healthcare system ends up being both very expensive and limited in its coverage, a problem that Sen. Bernie Sanders is targeting in his Medicare-for-all plan, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Sen. Bernie Sanders has unveiled a new single-payer healthcare plan which would provide all Americans with government-sponsored health coverage. Sanders's plan, supported by some 16 Democrats in the Senate, calls for an overhaul of the healthcare system with what would essentially be a tweaked and revitalized version of Medicare-for-all.

"Today we say that a function of a rational healthcare system is to provide quality care to all in a cost-effective way," declared Sanders, an independent from Vermont, "and not to continue a system which allows insurance companies and drug companies to make hundreds of billions in profits each year and makes healthcare industry CEO's extremely wealthy."

Flanked by supporting senators in making his Wednesday announcement, Sanders also noted that a Medicare-for-all program would end "the complexity of a system which adds enormous stress at a time when people need it the least."

I spoke on Sept. 13 to Russell Mokhiber, founder of The Corporate Crime Reporter and of SinglePayerAction.org. Mokhiber has long been an advocate of the single-payer option. He is also someone who watches closely the deadly nature of corporate greed.

Dennis Bernstein: Please give us your initial reaction. Bernie has a number of senators who say they believe in single-payer. Several presidential hopefuls are among those who jumped on the Sanders Single-Payer bandwagon. You think their playing early presidential politics with single-payer, or are they true believers? Do they support Sander's vision?

Russell Mokhiber: That is what they are saying, and it is obviously because of the grassroots prairie fire that has been lit by single-payer activists over the years. It is truly out of our hands now.

Usually when you go to these meetings with your member of congress, the single-payer activists would be the only ones raising the issue. Now we are standing in line screaming at our congress people, demanding it, because the situation on the ground has become so bad.

Nine years ago, when the insurance industry-written Obamacare was introduced, there were 23 people testifying. They refused to listen to any of us who wanted to put single-payer on the table. In fact, they had us arrested. Six months ago, Bernie's healthcare person told us that there wasn't going to be a single-payer bill because they didn't want to risk a Democratic Senate in 2018 and they thought that single-payer would hurt them. But once they saw the grassroots pressure, they totally flipped. Just a month ago, Bernie had in this bill co-pays and deductibles.

So this is all about the grassroots pressure. Obviously it has now become a hot political issue. Someone like Kamala Harris would never have touched this just a couple weeks ago. Senator Richard Blumenthal from the insurance state of Connecticut has signed on!

Do we believe that they will push single-payer if we take our foot off the gas? No. We believe the Democratic Party is structurally incapable of being a people's party. The only way they are going to respond is if the people keep their foot on the gas. This seems very similar to California in 2006 when the Democrats passed single-payer in California knowing that Governor Schwarzenegger was going to veto it.

We are very encouraged by this response but we really want to see this happen, not just political posturing. We are concerned that the Democrats will use this to gain power and then push it aside for something like a public option or to secure the position of the insurance industry in the current system.

I was at a conference this week called by Cornel West and the Green Party to address the fact that the Democratic Party is structurally incapable of being a people's party. My colleague Bruce Dixon at Black Agenda Report said a few years ago that Bernie is like a sheepdog into the Democratic Party. He is shepherding the left back into the party. My hope is that, if this is what is going on, at least we will get out of it single-payer for all Americans.

DB: Russell, just take a moment to describe what you see as the difference between Obamacare and a single-payer system.

RM: Obamacare was written by insurance industry lobbyists to preserve the position of the insurance industry within the system. This meant that we would continue to have 30 million Americans uninsured, as we have right now, that most people who have insurance are underinsured, they still go bankrupt even with insurance, that thousands of people die every year because of lack of health insurance.

The only way to change the situation is to pursue a single-payer system, meaning

you get rid of all the private insurance payers and you have just one: Medicare for all with no co-pays and no deductibles. When every American is born, he or she gets a birth certificate and a Medicare card. You are covered through the tax system.

So yes, we are going to be taxed, but the amount we pay in taxes will be significantly less than the amount we currently pay in premiums, deductibles and co-pays. That money that we save by getting rid of all the administrative waste will ensure that everyone is covered, state of the art.

The amazing thing about this press conference today wasn't what the senators were saying. For the most part, they were just posturing, maybe with the exception of Bernie. It was the people who spoke before the senators.

A doctor from Canada testified that 97% of Canadians love their single-payer system. She described how, when she was pregnant, there were no bills, no co-payments. There was a businessman from Pennsylvania who started a group of businesses for single-payer, because the reality is that businesses are going crazy trying to cover all their employees and many employees are afraid to leave their jobs because then they will lose their insurance.

It is no longer linked to employment, you are covered from cradle to grave, you have your choice of doctor and hospital. When you need medical care, you go to the best place in your area, there is no in-network or out-of-network.

DB: That is essentially what it breaks down to for most civilized countries—even not so civilized countries—in this world. How do you explain that the two Democratic leaders—Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi—are mum on single-payer, or worse?

RM: I think it is part of the feud within the Democratic Party. Coincidentally, Hillary is traveling the country right now with her new book, *What Happened*. She is obviously very critical of Bernie Sanders and what he did during the election.

There is a battle going on right now for the soul of the Democratic Party. I am very concerned about the single-payer movement because the Democrats appear to be using this to take the Senate in 2018 and the White House and then back off on single-payer.

DB: This industry is not going to go down easy. They spend a great deal of money to keep this system in place. These Congresspeople aren't just voting their consciences here.

RM: The great thing about single payer is that it will drop the cost of

healthcare because a single-payer is going to refuse to pay these exorbitant rates for pharmaceuticals, they are going to insist on paying what the rest of the world pays.

The medical industrial complex is in it for a bottom line profit motive. Twenty years ago in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, a surgeon wrote that medical care is very similar to any other good in America: doctors provide it and you buy it.

So there is a debate now about whether healthcare should be considered a commodity or a right. The Democrats are now getting the message that it is a human right and that the people are demanding it. But as you point out, very powerful forces are bent on defeating it.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
