

# What is behind the opposition to the Obama healthcare plan?

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President Obama's proposed restructuring of the US healthcare system has come under ferocious attack over the past week. Right-wing activists, in many cases organized by groups affiliated with the Republican Party or financed by sections of the healthcare industry, turned out at town hall meetings to shout down Democratic congressmen or Obama aides. There have been death threats and some actual violence.

The right-wing attack combines hysterical distortion of the provisions of the Obama plan (frequently, and falsely, branded as "socialized medicine") with an appeal to the concerns of wide layers of the American population who sense, quite correctly, that the healthcare restructuring being promoted in Washington will come at their expense and will benefit only the big corporate interests.

Chief among the distortions has been the claim, fostered most notably by former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, that the Obama plan promotes euthanasia and that millions of elderly people will be hauled before a federal "death panel" to decide whether paying for their healthcare was warranted based on their "level of productivity in society."

The actual provision, Section 1323 of one version of legislation that has passed one committee in the House of Representatives, merely states that Medicare will now reimburse doctors who hold end-of-life counseling sessions for beneficiaries who want to know their options on hospice care, living wills, and similar services.

Palin, who resigned as governor of Alaska July 26 in order to pursue a national career as spokeswoman for the fascistic wing of the Republican Party, is appealing to the same Christian fundamentalist elements who mobilized around the case of Terri Schiavo in 2005.

The popular disaffection with the Obama healthcare plan goes much further, however, than the fanatical right-to-life constituency. The Obama administration has based

its program for healthcare restructuring entirely on the argument that healthcare costs are bankrupting the US economy and that controlling and reducing these costs is essential.

The logical conclusion of this policy—even if officially denied by the White House—is that *somebody's* healthcare is too expensive and must be cut back or eliminated. Millions of people fear that that somebody is likely to be them and their families. One opinion poll published last week showed that 53 percent believed they would be worse off or no better than before under the Obama plan.

Obama and the congressional Democrats have sought to use the frenzied outpourings of his right-wing critics to discredit all opposition to the measures that the administration is pursuing to cut social benefit programs like Medicare and impose even greater burdens on American working people.

The crudest effort along these lines came in a column published in *USAToday* Monday by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, which branded the opposition to Obama's healthcare plan "un-American attacks." They criticized the right-wing disruptions as an effort to suppress discussion, then pledged that the healthcare "reform" would mean higher-quality care, an end to insurance company abuses and "stability and peace of mind for the middle class."

In his radio speech Saturday and at a carefully controlled town hall meeting in New Hampshire Tuesday, Obama sought to soothe popular concerns over the implication of the healthcare cost-cutting and put a "progressive" gloss on what is a fundamentally reactionary and pro-corporate policy.

The president told his New Hampshire audience that charges that his program will cut Medicare benefits for the elderly were false. "It's a myth that we're going to be cutting your Medicare benefits," he said. "We're not."

He claimed that the only cut in Medicare would be \$177 billion in subsidies to insurance companies that operate private Medicare Advantage plans. But all the plans moving through the House and Senate—with full backing by the White House—call for substantial reductions in Medicare reimbursement to hospitals and doctors, which will inevitably be translated into cutbacks in care for the elderly and disabled.

One of the first questions taken by Obama—no doubt prearranged by White House political operatives—was from a woman denied coverage by her insurance company because of a pre-existing condition. Expressing sympathy for her plight, Obama sought to use the exchange to present his program as a benefit for those whose healthcare benefits have been cut back or eliminated by profit-driven insurers.

The real relationship of Obama and the Democrats to the insurance industry was far more accurately described by *BusinessWeek* magazine in its current cover story on healthcare “reform,” headlined, “The Health Insurers Have Already Won.” The magazine details how UnitedHealthGroup, the largest US health insurer, has used its influence in Washington, particularly with conservative congressional Democrats in the “Blue Dog” caucus and Obama advisers like former senator Tom Daschle, to effectively dictate the parameters of the healthcare legislation moving through Congress.

“The industry has already accomplished its main goal of at least curbing, and maybe blocking altogether, any new publicly administered insurance program that could grab market share from the corporations that dominate the business,” *BusinessWeek* wrote approvingly. UnitedHealthCare, Aetna and Wellpoint have “also achieved a secondary aim of constraining the new benefits that will become available to tens of millions of people who are currently uninsured. That will make the new customers more lucrative to the industry.”

In other words, the corporate profiteers have a tight grip over the healthcare legislation. Their political servants in both the Republican and Democratic parties can be relied on to guarantee their financial interests are served by any healthcare restructuring, or to torpedo the bill outright if that proves necessary.

Over the past several weeks, there has been detailed press coverage of the enormous sums that the drug companies, the insurance companies, the for-profit hospital chains and other corporate interests have poured into “lobbying” and “campaign contributions”—the two Washington euphemisms for outright bribery. (See “US

health care lobby pumps millions into Obama’s cost-cutting drive” and “The drug lobby demands, and gets, Obama pledge to protect health care profits”)

According to press reports Tuesday, the drug industry lobby PhRMA will launch a \$150 million advertising blitz in support of Obama’s healthcare reform drive, after the White House reaffirmed its promise that it will limit the industry’s “contribution” to the cost of healthcare restructuring to the \$80 billion agreed on in closed-door talks between Obama aides and PhRMA chief Billy Tauzin (a founding member of the “Blue Dogs” before he left Congress to become an open rather than concealed representative of the drug manufacturers).

Obama has repeatedly avowed his support for capitalist medicine, and the “right” of drug companies, the insurance companies, the medical equipment manufacturers, and a host of other parasites to profit from the sick. His differences with his Republican opponents are purely tactical, and largely concern which sections of corporate America will benefit the most from the current legislative undertaking.

Nothing that emerges from the machinations of big business politicians and corporate lobbyists in Washington can serve the needs of working people. Medical care must be made available to every American citizen and resident, provided for at state expense as a basic human right. This requires the nationalization of the insurance companies, the drug companies, and all the other healthcare profiteers, and the establishment of a system of socialized medicine provided free to all who need it.



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