

Healthcare and the social crisis in America

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A tidal wave of suffering and human need has been on display this week at a free healthcare clinic inside a Los Angeles-area sports arena. Just as the New Orleans Superdome, packed with refugees from Hurricane Katrina, shocked the world in 2005, the scene in Inglewood, California gives a glimpse of the social crisis devastating America. And it could be multiplied, a thousand times over, in every city, suburb and rural district of the United States, as deepening unemployment and spreading homelessness exacerbate what was already a vast unmet need for healthcare services.

Thousands of uninsured workers and their families have flocked to the Forum at Inglewood since Tuesday, seeking free medical and dental care from a group of volunteer doctors, dentists and nurses. The Forum, formerly the suburban home of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team, became for a week the site of the largest free medical clinic in American history.

The organizers of the event, the Remote Area Medical Foundation, a Tennessee-based charity that relies on contributions of money and medical supplies and volunteer medical personnel, said that more than 8,000 people would receive help at the Forum before the event was finished. In the first three days alone, 706 teeth were extracted, 1,640 fillings put in, 141 mammograms administered and 550 sets of eyeglasses prepared. There were hundreds of pap smears and tuberculosis tests. Some patients were put directly into waiting ambulances and taken to local emergency rooms.

Many of the patients waited for hours or slept overnight in their cars to make sure they did not lose their place in line. The demand has overwhelmed the supply of volunteers, with foundation leader Stan Brock saying the clinic had work for 100 dentists and 20 eye doctors, more than three times the number who were mobilized.

Remote Area Medical has focused on impoverished third-world countries for more than 20 years, beginning with clinics in the Amazon jungle of Brazil. But in recent years it has begun to work inside the United States, including in New Orleans after Katrina, and earlier this

year in the Appalachian foothills of Virginia, where volunteer dentists performed more than 4,300 tooth extractions in two days.

The Los Angeles event was made possible by a group of film and record producers who learned of the charity's activities from a "60 Minutes" profile and contacted Brock. The Forum, now owned by a local church, was chosen as a centrally located site, close to the densely populated south side Los Angeles.

One volunteer dentist who spoke to the local media said that conditions in Los Angeles were worse than in Brazil, where he has done equivalent charity work. "They have a nice system of public hospitals and clinics," he said, referring to Brazil. A volunteer doctor, when asked about the difference between Third World conditions and those in Los Angeles, responded, "Here the people speak English."

According to local press accounts, among those seeking help at the clinic were:

- A homeless man who camped outside in order to get glasses
- An unemployed grocery clerk needing a root canal
- A laid-off auto mechanic with back pain
- A laid-off office worker uninsured for two years
- A cancer patient who had exhausted her benefits under her HMO plan
- A community college student with sinus problems and blurred vision
- A laid-off security guard who needed glasses
- An unemployed grocery clerk with a toothache
- A woman whose children are covered under the state Medi-Cal plan but lacks insurance for herself
- A county government worker whose dental insurance deductibles were too high to afford treatment for her husband and three-year-old daughter
- A retired welder who lost his coverage while he was in the middle of getting dentures
- A couple, both employed, who between them needed dentures, a general physical, a breast exam and a pap smear

- A diabetic amputee who could not afford to buy needed drugs
- A retiree needing an X-ray for a lung problem
- A 70-year-old Vietnam vet who put off a root canal for two years because the VA hospital was overwhelmed with more urgent cases
- A 63-year-old woman who received her first new pair of glasses in five years
- A 46-year-old woman who had an abnormal pap smear last year but was unable to follow up because Medi-Cal denied her coverage.

Carol Meyer, a top official of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, visited the Forum and drew the obvious lesson, telling reporters: “The current system of healthcare in the United States is broken.” *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez called the lines outside the Forum, “the perfect distillation of an unconscionable societal failure.”

The huge turnout for the free clinic attracted significant media coverage in both the network television news and the major daily newspapers. But neither of the two sides in the official “healthcare debate” has made any reference to it.

For the Republican Party, the vast dimensions of the social crisis in America are an inconvenient distraction from its ongoing efforts to mobilize ultra-right and fascist-minded elements against the Obama administration. Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, Fox News & Co. prefer fanning hysteria over “death panels” and other such mirages to confronting the reality that tens of millions of working people lack access to needed healthcare because they have no insurance or no money.

For Obama and the Democrats, however, the Forum event is equally unwelcome. The president addressed town hall meetings on healthcare Friday night and Saturday night in Montana and Colorado. At neither of the forums, heavily publicized and televised live on cable, did he make any reference to the extraordinary and moving spectacle in Los Angeles. On Sunday, an op-ed column on healthcare appeared in the *New York Times* under Obama’s byline, also without any mention of the Forum free clinic.

This deliberate silence is proof enough that Obama’s healthcare program has nothing to do with “reform,” in the sense of any genuine effort to make an improvement, even of a minimal character, in the availability of healthcare to working people.

More than four decades ago, both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson visited impoverished areas of

Appalachia as part of efforts to win support for the anti-poverty measures enacted during the 1960s. If Obama were advocating even a limited social reform, he would have seized on the Los Angeles event as a demonstration of the acute social need.

But the goal of Obama’s pro-corporate healthcare restructuring is to increase the financial health of American capitalism, not to improve the physical health of the American people. Hence his overriding emphasis on the need to cut healthcare spending, in order to reduce labor costs and improve the competitive position of corporate America.

That is why the Obama healthcare program is supported by major sections of big business, including the bulk of those corporations—drug manufacturers, health insurance companies, and giant hospital chains—whose profit drive is fundamentally responsible for the healthcare crisis.

The Obama plan has been drawn up in close consultation with these corporate interests, who have been given explicit assurances that their profits will not be threatened. It is the patients, i.e., the entire American population, who will bear the cost, through the establishment of a two-class healthcare system—first-class care for those who can afford it, and cut-rate care for the vast majority.

As opposed to the fake alternatives presented by the Obama administration—either his reactionary healthcare program or the status quo—the working class must demand an end to medicine-for-profit, and the establishment of free healthcare for all, as a basic human right, to be provided at public expense.

The resources for healthcare should be obtained as part of the socialist reorganization of all of economic life. This means the nationalization of the giant corporations and banks, the confiscation of the wealth of Wall Street and the super-rich, and the transformation of the healthcare industry into a public utility dedicated to serving human needs and democratically owned and controlled by the working people.

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