

Democrats hold town hall meetings on Obama health care overhaul

Jeff Lassahn, Ed Hightower
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Democrats are continuing a nationwide effort to drum up support for the Obama administration's health care proposals through a series of town hall meetings being held nationwide. The plans for an overhaul of the system, now working their way through congress, focus overwhelmingly on cutting costs for businesses and the government.

The savings will come from reducing quality of care for those on government programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, while defending the profits of the insurance industry, pharmaceutical companies, and for-profit hospitals. The plans also include a patient mandate, requiring every individual to obtain coverage or pay a penalty. Fines for businesses that fail to offer their employees coverage will be minimal.

Obama initially expressed support for a public option to private insurance to be available on the health care "exchanges" being proposed. Under pressure from the insurance industry, however, the administration has now signaled its willingness to abandon even this fig leaf of reform.

Public opinion on Obama's health care reform is worsening. Reports of town-hall meetings in the media have emphasized right-wing opposition to the health care proposals, which demagogically exploits Democrats' plans for cost-cutting in an effort to defend the current system.

Correspondents from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended a town-hall meeting in Newport News, Virginia, on September 1, held by Democratic Representative Bobby Scott, from Virginia's 3rd District. His focus was to present the plan as a cure to the desperate health care situation facing millions of Americans. While there was a contingent of right-wing opposition, there was also considerable hostility directed towards attacks on the right to quality health care.

Around 350 people crowded into a cultural arts building in a working class section of Newport News for the meeting. Scott quickly went through a Power Point presentation on HR 3200, the bill for health care sponsored by Democrats on the House Ways and Means and other committees. The presentation emphasized the soaring costs of health care in the United States, briefly mentioned the difficulties facing the population, and then stressed the benefits local small businesses would receive from HR 3200.

Scott then took questions from randomly selected audience members. The first number called belonged to WSWS reporter Ed Hightower.

Hightower asked: "Will you support HR3200 if the public option is dropped?"

Scott replied, "I don't want to be dogmatic about the public option. The problem that I see without the public option is that if you are requiring or at least coercing people to buy a product, and there is essentially one company selling the product, there is essentially no incentive for them to limit their cost."

He added, "Now if you eliminate the public option, I don't see how the thing can work.... I'm not prepared to say that I won't vote for it, but I don't see how it could work without it."

In a related comment, Scott said that it was impossible to predict the final form of HR3200. Congress was a sort of black box, he claimed, whose output no one can know for sure ahead of time. In reality, Scott is quite familiar with the inner workings of congress and knows that there is effectively no chance that the public health insurance option will survive into the bill's final form.

Scott's sentiments stood in stark contrast to those voiced by the audience on the dire health care situation in America.

An older teacher from Norfolk described the sacrifices

he and other union teachers made—they were forced to miss two pay raises—to obtain health insurance. Norfolk teachers were constantly moving from one insurance provider to another, as costs continued to rise. Later, his fellow teachers lost their employer-based coverage because of its high cost.

Another older man described serving in World War II at 14 years old and living through southern segregation. To loud applause, he decried the fact that many Americans have no health care access at all.

A youth from Portsmouth, Virginia, opposed the fact that insurance companies can deny coverage based on preexisting conditions. His mother had been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and could not obtain health insurance. He asked what HR3200 would do to provide health care for the homeless. Rep. Scott made mention of vague support for community institutions, and offered that the bill provides "tax credits."

Both the character and conduct of the audience during the meeting testified to the extreme volatility of the health care debate. The majority of the crowd strongly supported universal health care, showing genuine compassion and concern over the social crisis in America.

There were numerous expressions of outrage that there was no basic guarantee of health care for all. Many participants spoke highly of Medicare and government health care provided by the military. Notably, there was loud cheering and applause with the mention of raising taxes on those earning more than \$350,000 per year to fund the health care bill.

These sentiments—already to the left of the Democrats' positions—were mixed with lingering illusions that Obama, Scott and the Democratic Party would promote such policies.

In opposition to the prevailing mood, a boisterous contingent attempted to disrupt the meeting from the right. Congressman Scott could not even complete his brief presentation without interruptions from these sections of the audience. A handful of supporters of the Tidewater Libertarian Party made innumerable interjections about the unconstitutional nature of any government action concerning health care.

To that effect, one female audience member insisted that health care was not a right because it was not explicitly mentioned in the constitution. The majority of the audience responded with disapproval. Angry participants stood and denounced her, as her outnumbered supporters stood and shouted back.

Socialist Equality Party members spoke with attendees

after the meeting and distributed the statement, "Obama health care overhaul based on cost-cutting and deficit reduction."

At a meeting in West Bloomfield, Michigan, held by Democratic Congressman Gary Peters, also on September 1, attendees voiced their deep concerns over the state of health care in America.

Paula Krzeczowski, a therapist, told the WSWs, "I don't think socialism is a bad word. There is a shift in opinion that is taking place in this country. Why are we the only major industrial country that has no national health care? I think health care is a right—every person has the right to some basic form of health care. I feel very strongly about this."

A nurse told the WSWs, "I am for a single payer system. I was raised in Sweden. I think the American health care system is great for some people, but terrible for most. If something is not done, costs will go up for everyone. At some point there will be rationing—in fact health care is being rationed now."

"Everyone should have care, not just the elderly and not just children."

About the anti Obama demonstrators she remarked, "It saddens me. On some of the signs I see the use of analogies to the Nazis—do they realize what they are saying? I think many of these people don't even realize that Medicare is a national health care program."

She expressed concern over the retreats by the Obama administration in the face of the right-wing campaign. "Obama has backed down. Judging by what is happening now it is going to be a watered down version. The only way it is going to work is with a single-payer system." She added, "But I think you have to start somewhere."



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