

Obama's cynical pursuit of health care "reform"

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For the third time in a week, Barack Obama took to the stage to stump for his health care overhaul, this time in Strongsville, Ohio on Monday. His remarks reeked of cynicism and hypocrisy, as he engaged in a last-ditch effort to win popular support and garner sufficient votes in Congress to push through the legislation.

For his own purposes, the president drew attention to the hardships faced by individuals and families under the present health care setup, arguing the proposals he is advancing would remedy the situation. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Obama related the story of Natoma Canfield at the Strongsville rally. Ms. Canfield is a 50-year-old Ohio resident and cancer survivor, forced to drop her health coverage after her insurer jacked up the premiums. She was recently diagnosed with leukemia. Obama has alluded to this woman's struggles on a number of occasions; his exploitation of her dilemma this time around was especially distasteful.

"So you want to know why I'm here, Ohio?" Obama asked. "I'm here because of Natoma. I'm here because of the countless others who have been forced to face the most terrifying challenges in their lives with the added burden of medical bills they can't pay. I don't think that's right."

Obama's claim that the problems confronting Ms. Canfield and others like her—skyrocketing premiums, massive out-of-pocket expenses—would be addressed by his health care plan is a lie. He knows perfectly well that the proposed legislation would have no real power to rein in insurance premium costs.

In fact, a survey released last week by the National Business Group on Health found that with or without Obama's health care plan two-thirds of big employers plan to shift more insurance costs to their workers, in the form of significantly higher premiums, deductibles and copayments.

While Obama is aware of these facts, it didn't stop him from making the claim that his health care plan "would end the worst practices of the insurance companies." He told his

Ohio audience, "This is like a patient's bill of rights on steroids." What nonsense!

The true character of his health care agenda became clearer later in his remarks, however, when he said "there were some who had wanted to scrap the system of private insurance and replace it with government-run care ... but I did not see that being practical to help right away for people who really need it."

Obama's defense of private health insurers has nothing to do with helping the "people who really need it," "right away" or any other time, and everything to do with defending the insurance giants' profits. The insurance industry has spent hundreds of millions lobbying Congress to shape the health care legislation in its interest, focusing in particular on keeping a government-run public option out of any bill that emerges.

Over the course of the last year most of the lobbying effort has gone towards defeating Obama's health care plan. However, in the final phase, Pharma—a drug makers' association—kicked in \$12 million for the campaign *in favor* of Obama's "reform," an indication that a substantial proportion of health care industry CEOs grasp that the legislation will have a favorable impact on their bottom lines.

As he has over the past year, Obama mendaciously contended that a plan that slashes costs and doesn't expand the federal deficit will result in additional coverage and reduced costs for working class families and seniors. "Our proposal is paid for," he gloated Monday. "We go after waste and abuse in the system, especially in Medicare. Our cost-cutting measures would reduce most people's premiums and bring down our deficit by up to a trillion dollars over the next two decades."

The president added that money saved in the crackdown on waste in Medicare "should be spent on care for seniors, not on the care and feeding of the insurance companies through sweetheart deals. And every senior should know there is no cutting of your guaranteed Medicare benefits."

Whether the reference to "guaranteed" Medicare benefits

indicates that some bare-bones level of care has been agreed to for the program, or the statement is false on its face, Obama conveniently neglected to mention that his plan would cut about \$500 billion from Medicare. These cutbacks are aimed at gutting the federally run program for the elderly, eliminating “unnecessary” services and treatments. The legislation will also establish a Medicare task force, utilizing comparative effectiveness research to recommend sweeping reductions in care for seniors.

But Obama ignores all this, characterizing his plan as a sort of populist panacea. “It’s been such a long time since we made government on the side of ordinary working folks,” he said, “where we did something for them that relieved some of their struggles; that made folks who work hard every day and are doing the right thing and who are looking out for the families and contributing to their communities, that just gave them a little bit of a better chance to live out their American Dream.” What hypocrisy!

It should be remembered that the same Obama that now feigns deep sympathies for “ordinary working folk” was responsible for engineering the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler that resulted in the savaging of wages, health care and other benefits for thousands of autoworkers.

In general, Obama’s efforts to be a “man of the people” inevitably ring false and hollow, although he and his handlers recognize their necessity on occasions such as the Strongsville meeting. The president’s essential lack of interest in and indifference toward the problems of working people come across in everything he says and does.

Obama’s proposed legislation is the first step in a radical restructuring of the health care system in the US, directed first at Medicare, the government financed and administered program for the elderly put in place almost a half-century ago. A fully class-based system will take its place, in which care and services are reduced and rationed for the vast majority, while the wealthy continue to have access to the best care money can buy.

One of the main features of Obama’s plan is the so-called individual mandate, which would require individuals and families to purchase insurance coverage or pay a penalty. With no enforceable restrictions on what the insurance companies can charge for premiums, or what is covered under these policies, these millions of new cash-paying customers will be at the mercy of the insurance industry.

The Obama administration claims that 31 million of the close to 50 million people in the US currently without insurance will be covered under the new legislation. About half of these people would be covered by Medicaid, the health care program for the poor jointly administered by the federal government and the states.

States across the country are already operating with huge

budget deficits, and will be hard-pressed to accommodate a new influx into the Medicaid program. States have begun significantly cutting back on their already reduced payments to physicians and other Medicaid providers, prompting some doctors to stop accepting Medicaid patients altogether. Hence this group of newly insured under Obama’s plan could have coverage in name but drastically reduced services in practice, or none at all.

The Obama administration and the Democratic Congressional leadership are frantically working to line up the votes to secure passage of the legislation through a process called reconciliation, requiring only a simple majority vote. With the loss of a Senate seat to the Republicans in the Massachusetts special election in January, they no longer have the votes to override a Republican filibuster.

Much of the opposition to the plan is coming from some House Democrats who feel that the Senate version of the health care plan does not go far enough in restricting federal funds for abortion. In fact, the Senate bill bans the use of federal subsidies to pay for abortion services and lays out a complex scheme to ensure this, the result of which would likely be to discourage insurers from offering any plans that cover abortions.

Through many election cycles, working people have been prodded into voting for the Democrats in no small measure because the party claimed to support the right to abortion, upheld by the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. It is notable that the signature legislation of the Obama administration, if passed, would have the effect of rendering the legal right to abortion basically unattainable for wide layers of working and poor women.

This miserably regressive and undemocratic result sums up the Obama and Democratic Party “solution” to the health care crisis.

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