

# In the aftermath of the health care vote

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In the aftermath of the passage of the health care bill, there have been various acts of right-wing vandalism and intimidation against congressional Democrats who voted for the legislation last week. Death threats have been issued by phone and email, and bricks have been thrown through the windows of Democratic Party offices in New York, Ohio, Kansas and Arizona.

These acts are largely the work of fascistic elements—in many cases, borderline lunatics—whose sociopathic conceptions are inspired and incited by the reactionary tirades that are the daily and standard fare of talk radio in the United States.

According to press reports, more than 100 Democratic members of the House of Representatives attended a closed-door meeting on Wednesday with the FBI and the US Capitol police. They discussed what one of those present called “serious concern” about security both in Washington and in their home districts during the spring recess, which has just begun.

There is, no doubt, a danger of violence against individual members of Congress. However, there is little evidence that the threats and acts that have occurred during the past week are manifestations of a mass right-wing movement. Rather, one has the impression that the media has been intent on inflating the scale and political significance of the opposition from the extreme right.

For what purpose? There is no doubt that Obama’s health care legislation enjoys the support of the most powerful sections of the financial and corporate elite. While marketing the legislation, for popular consumption, as a “reform” that will provide coverage for millions who have been uninsured, it has always been understood within the elite that the central

purpose of the legislation was to substantially reduce the costs of providing health care for the broad mass of the working population.

Indeed, it has been the veiled and ambiguous references to reducing Medicare payments, eliminating “unnecessary tests,” etc., that has fueled widespread popular suspicion that the Obama administration was not telling the people the truth about the purpose and ultimate effect of its proposed “reform.” Moreover, the fact that Obama rapidly abandoned his commitment to a “public option”—which had been proclaimed by liberal supporters as the absolutely essential prerequisite of any serious reform of the health care system—shattered the political credibility of the entire enterprise.

The growing public hostility led to the electoral debacle suffered by the Democratic Party in the “liberal” bastion of Massachusetts, the one state where the type of individual “mandate” included in the overhaul had already been tested. The Senate seat of the late Edward Kennedy went to a Republican who vowed to provide the “41<sup>st</sup> vote” against the health care bill.

In the immediate aftermath of the election—which was widely recognized as a devastating repudiation of Obama’s legislation by the Democratic Party’s working class constituency—the administration and the Democratic congressional leadership executed a dramatic shift in strategy and tactics.

The Obama White House, which had justified its gutting of the “public option” and countless other concessions in the name of “bi-partisanship,” declared that it would press for the passage of the legislation without any Republican support. Significantly, however, this shift was not accompanied by the

repudiation of previous concessions. Instead, Obama proceeded to make further concessions to the most reactionary elements within the Democratic Party itself, including on the issue of abortion.

Within the House and Senate, the Democratic leaders—who normally do not dare visit the restroom without begging the Republicans for permission—suddenly assumed a stance of vehement determination. Having for decades insisted that no law could be enacted without a “super-majority” of 60 votes, they suddenly devised a strategy in which a majority of one would be sufficient to pass the bill.

What was the source of the newfound courage of the Democrats? Quite simply, their masters on Wall Street and in the most powerful corporate boardrooms made it clear that they wanted the legislation passed.

For its part, the Republican Party leadership was left in the lurch. To the extent that its political strategy relies on keeping the most right-wing elements in a perpetual state of uproar, they were unprepared for the shift in the winds. Signs of a certain tactical disorientation were evident in their attempts to portray as a socialist measure the health care overhaul, which the corporate elite supports as an initial attack on social spending.

In the final days of the health care “debate,” the shift in the media was as dramatic as that in the White House and the Congress. The Republican opposition was portrayed as obstructionist and worse. Normally, the media ignores the associations of Republican legislators with fascist elements. But on the eve of the final vote on the bill, the major networks gave huge play to a motley crowd of racists and homophobes screaming epithets at Democratic congressmen.

In the aftermath of the passage of the bill, the media has largely endorsed the efforts of the Obama administration to portray the legislation as a monumental act of reform. Opposition to the bill is being presented as a right-wing phenomenon. The focus on the violence of the extreme right is an attempt to silence and discredit the far-more widespread doubts and concerns of countless millions of working people.

Of course, the violence should not be dismissed. It does reflect deep tensions arising out of an objective crisis. However, the great danger for the working class is that mass opposition remains subordinate to the Democratic Party and does not find a progressive, socialist outlet. It is under these conditions that the growth of an extreme right-wing movement, infused with populist demagoguery, will become a real threat.

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