

The conspiracy against Medicare

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One week ago, on Tuesday, May 24, voters in the 26th Congressional District of New York cast ballots in a special election that, unusually for American bourgeois politics, was actually focused on a significant issue of public policy—whether the Medicare program, which underwrites health care for the vast majority of Americans aged 65 and over, should be phased out and replaced by private insurance.

The Republican candidate to fill the vacancy in New York, Jane Corwin, said she supported the plan put forward by Representative Paul Ryan to end Medicare. The Democratic candidate, Kathy Hochul, campaigned almost exclusively on her opposition to the Ryan plan and won by a comfortable margin. This was as close to a referendum on the future of Medicare as the unrepresentative American political system can provide.

In the week since the election, the American political establishment has thrown its weight behind an effort to put the genie back in the bottle and reinforce the political consensus in Washington that the Medicare program is unaffordable and must be dismantled to prevent national bankruptcy.

Nothing could more clearly expose the fraud of democracy in the United States. The election confirms what has been amply demonstrated in opinion polls: that the overwhelming majority of the population, including a majority of Republicans, opposes cuts to Medicare. However, this mass sentiment has no impact on the actual course of government policy.

While the election was a direct repudiation of Republican proposals, if anything the results were more disturbing to the Democrats. Several prominent Democratic Party officials and liberal media pundits quickly stepped forward to declare that no one should draw the wrong conclusions from the Buffalo vote.

Leading the way was former president Bill Clinton, who the day after the election worried that, “Democrats will draw the conclusion that because Congressman Ryan’s proposal is not the best one, we shouldn’t do anything.” He added, “I completely disagree with that.”

Several leading congressional Democrats have made a point of emphasizing their agreement with Clinton. The Obama administration, for its part, is moving forward with closed-door discussions with Republicans to slash at least \$1 trillion in government spending, including health care programs.

The *New York Times* responded to the election by devoting its editorial, op-ed and news pages to intensifying its campaign to slash health care spending.

A *Times* editorial advised the Democrats not to draw the lesson that they should run in 2012 as the party opposing all cuts in Medicare. After citing Clinton’s remarks approvingly, the *Times* noted, “Democrats don’t like to admit this, but President Obama’s health care law reduces Medicare spending by more than \$500 billion through 2019.”

This was only an initial down payment, however. “After the law was passed, Mr. Obama proposed reducing health costs even more sharply,” the *Times* stressed.

America in 2011 is a vast catalogue of unmet social needs. Yet the spokesmen for the ruling elite preach austerity and sacrifice and warn sanctimoniously that “we” must give up our “spendthrift” ways. They attack, not the fraud and speculation of the banks, mortgage lenders and hedge funds that triggered the 2008 Wall Street crash, nor the profit-gouging of the oil companies, but the health care needs of the elderly, the poor and the disabled.

The Obama administration’s policies, in health care as in every other sphere, are tailored to the interests and demands of the financial elite. As the *Times* itself all but admits in its editorial, the Obama health care plan was not a progressive reform, but the first step in an assault on social benefits. It is part of an escalating campaign to eliminate every social gain of the working class made in the 20th century, in the United States and internationally.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the entire framework of the debate within the political establishment. The claim that there is no alternative to cuts in Medicare and other social programs is a fraud.

Vast wealth has been accumulated by a financial aristocracy which has exploited the economic crisis to loot the public treasury.

As an initial step to preserve and expand health care programs upon which millions of people depend, the SEP proposes a sharp increase in taxes on the wealthy. Even a 10 percent wealth tax on the top one percent would yield more than \$1.5 trillion. Corporations are sitting on trillions of dollars in cash. Global hedge fund assets have topped \$2 trillion.

Such a tax would not itself constitute a socialist measure. But even this modest progressive and democratic step would encounter immediate and ferocious opposition from the entire corporate and financial elite, which controls both the Democratic and Republican parties. It is remarkable that two-and-a-half years after the financial crisis, which has created untold misery in the US and throughout the world, not a single serious proposal has been introduced to alleviate social distress and reduce unemployment. Instead, the entire force of policy is in the opposite direction.

Health care is a basic social right. To defend and expand this right requires the mass mobilization of the working class in opposition to the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it defends. If American capitalism cannot afford to provide medical care for the elderly, that is an irrefutable argument for putting an end to capitalism and placing economic life on a new and more rational foundation, with the priority given to human need, not private profit.

The solution to the health care crisis is to put an end to the privately owned health care corporations, ban the exploitation of human suffering for private gain, and establish socialized medicine, under which high-quality health care is provided free of charge for the entire population.

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