Uninsured in Detroit speak on health care crisis

“It is like they are trying to find a way to kill us off”

A WSWS reporting team
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A WSWS reporting team recently spoke to workers attending a free health screening in Northwest Detroit. The event was part of the Wayne County Health on Wheels Mobile Unit program, which provides free health and dental screenings to resident of Wayne County, which encompasses the city of Detroit and western suburbs.

The clinics, limited as they are, only reach a small fraction of the uninsured in the Wayne County area. Despite the passage of Obama’s so-called health care reform the number of uninsured continues to rise. According to Mary Mazur, director of communications and community collaboration for the Wayne County Health and Human Services Department, there are some 400,000 medically uninsured in the county. That is about one-third of the 1.2 million uninsured in the state of Michigan.

Mazur told the WSWS the mobile unit planned to be at two locations per month. At the first event, held on November 7 at the Russell Bazaar in Detroit, over 400 individuals were served. She said that in some cases individuals who attended the clinic were provided with essential and life-saving services.

“We do rapid testing for HIV; within 20 minutes the results are known. Also cholesterol testing. Blood pressure screenings. Body mass screenings and also counseling for diabetes. We also do screenings for glucose.

“There has always been a disconnect and disparity when it comes to anything worthwhile such as health care. Health care costs have been high and quality health care has been for those who can afford it. Those who are underemployed, uninsured or underinsured really have a hard problem and they have to choose many times between the roof over their heads and getting some sort of regular health screening. For example, instead of going to the dentist or going to the doctor, they are just trying to feed their family and pay the utility bills. They neglect themselves until many times it is too late.”

The WSWS spoke to a number of those seeking medical attention. A large portion of those participating were working or on pensions, but still lacked basic medical coverage.

Michael Jackson, a part-time worker, told the WSWS that he did not have health insurance from his job. “They offer medical, but it is too expensive for a part-time worker. I have to seek medical attention any way I can regardless of my pay.

“I am trying to find full-time work, but there isn’t any, or if there is it is minimum wage. I have been there 4 years looking for something to get out of there. We are not in a recovery. Not in my neck of the woods.

“My friends are in the same situation. They have kids. They have to limit their hours at work in order to qualify for Medicaid. It sucks big time.”

He spoke about the cuts to Medicare and other social programs being advanced by the Obama administration and Congress. “For my generation, we will have to work until age 67 to collect Medicare. Are you kidding me? I am 46 now. It is like they are trying to find a way to kill us off.”

John Davis, 60, worked for Chrysler for 37 years at

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the Jefferson North plant in Detroit, retiring in 2008.

"During the restructuring they took all the retirees' eye care and dental, but now I need some work done on my teeth. So I saw the article in the paper about help with dental and came down. I am in that area where there is no coverage for dental and glasses. They said it was a concession.

"When I first heard about the UAW retirees losing their benefits, I thought about it like the haves and have-nots," Davis said. "Actually I think what they are trying to do is get one class. It is the rich and the poor and the poor is not a class! All this is because of Wall Street. Just like Big Oil. They give them concessions. We live in a capitalist society and everything is going to come off the backs of the poor."

Tracy Mathews said, "We do need to have some kind of better health care system. I don't have any health insurance. I was doing work for the university. Right now I can't collect my unemployment that was due to me. I am trying to do the best I can.

"I needed to take some tests, but I had to stop because my insurance was cancelled. I have been without insurance for two years. I went to the emergency room in October and had to wait to make an appointment because the clinics are backed up. They told me not to call back until December or January to make an appointment. When you get older stuff starts happening. My faith in God has been pulling me through, otherwise I couldn't survive."

John has been living without income since 2001. Though he was initially approved for federal disability insurance payments and received checks for several years, a paperwork error caused his payments to be discontinued.

He was attending the health fair because he only has health care coverage for care for his primary health condition. The program will not help with any of his health problems unrelated to his disability.

He said: "When they cut my disability they also took away my Medicaid. I have applied to get just the Medicaid benefits but have been turned down. So now after losing the Social Security appeal process I'm going to have to reapply as a whole new case. Social Security claims they lost my file and I cannot figure out how they could have mailed out all those checks and have no record of me. I think they do not want to pay what they owe me in back benefits.

"I still owe $7,000 in medical bills and I just can't afford to pay. I did not know that my Medicaid health care had been cut off so I was going to the doctor and then found out I had no coverage. I cannot pay it back without any income coming in, much less see a doctor and pay up front. For now, I have brothers and sisters working out at GM who are helping me with day to day expense until I can get my benefits back."

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