

President Obama, administration officials defend pro-corporate health care overhaul

Thomas Gaist
31 October 2013

US President Barack Obama and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius defended the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Wednesday, amidst criticism over the non-functioning of the healthcare.gov web site and news that hundreds of thousands of people will lose their current policies.

Sebelius testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, while Obama gave a speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston, Massachusetts.

In her opening statement before the House, Sebelius sought to defend the administration's crisis-ridden website. "Today, more individuals are successfully creating accounts, logging in, and moving on to apply for coverage and shop for plans," she said. "We are pleased with these quick improvements, but we know there is still significant, additional work to be done."

Yet throughout the hearings, users attempting to log in to healthcare.gov were met with a message reading, "The system is down at the moment. We are experiencing technical difficulties and hope to have them resolved soon. Please try again later."

The White House continues to refuse to release information on how many people have actually been able to register and enroll in coverage.

Republican representatives issued criticisms and denunciations of Sebelius and the health care web site. The Republicans are cynically seeking to exploit popular opposition to the program for their own ends. Whatever their tactical differences, both parties are fully in favor of major cuts in health care spending and the transfer of costs onto the backs of individuals.

As the Congressional hearings took place, leading Democrats and Republicans met to begin discussions on how to slash hundreds of billions of dollars from basic entitlement programs, including Medicare and Social Security.

Democrats spent much of their time responding to Republican criticisms by denying that Obamacare is a "big government" program that in any way impinges on the prerogatives of big business and the insurance companies.

Sebelius also went out of her way during testimony to state that she "believes in the market." She said in her opening statement, "Because we have created competition where there was not competition before, insurers are now eager for new business, and have created new health care plans with more choices."

"This is not socialized medicine," Democratic Congressmen Frank Pallone (New Jersey) said. "This is in fact private insurance in a competitive market... We don't have a government controlled system. We have private markets." Pallone and Sebelius claimed that insurance companies were only canceling bad policies that could no longer be sold.

The reference to "competition" is a fraud. The private insurers will have a captive marketplace of millions of people who will be required to purchase their products or face a penalty. While there are basic requirements for all plans on the market, there is no meaningful oversight over what the insurers can charge for their policies.

In his own remarks, Obama defended the ACA with the familiar mixture of homilies and bromides. He characterized the ACA as the product of a "progressive vision of health care for all," combined with "ideas about markets and competition that have been championed by conservatives." He added that "this debate has never been about right or left" and praised Americans' "rugged individualism" and "sense of self-reliance."

Indeed, the "debate" over health care in Washington is between two right-wing parties with slightly differing

tactical conceptions over how best to restructure health care to shift the cost burden away from corporations and the government.

When the ACA was signed in 2010, Obama claimed that it would extend coverage to millions of uninsured and initiate a progressive transformation of the US health care system. Now, the fundamentally right-wing character of the whole measure is becoming more and more clear as the program is being implemented.

The legislation effectively enables companies, states and cities to drop their own health care coverage and force individuals to purchase coverage individually on the government regulated exchanges.

Contrary to the claims of the Obama administration, NBC News reported that the administration knew that millions of people stood to lose their current coverage once the health care reforms were implemented. Between 50 and 75 percent of individual health insurance purchasers will receive cancellation letters as a result of the ACA. This applies to those whose current plans do not meet the requirements of the new markets, as soon as these plans are changed by the insurers. Many of these will face higher rates immediately when they purchase new plans.

The administration's frequently touted promise that ACA will extend coverage to the all of America's uninsured is also riddled with qualifications. Rather than universal coverage, freely accessible to all, Obamacare sets up a multi-tiered system based on ability to pay in which large sections of the population will receive "skeleton" health care packages or be effectively excluded from care altogether.

The root cause of the technical problems encountered by the administration is the complexity of the mechanism they have devised for insuring private control over health insurance. As a result, registering for the web site involves jumping through numerous hoops and dealing with different agencies to confirm eligibility. This convoluted apparatus—itself a product of the subordination of health care needs to the private insurance companies—accounts for the self-admitted "debacle" that has been the Obamacare rollout.

Despite claims that ACA constitutes a basis for "nearly universal" health care, projections drawn up by the Congressional Budget Office found that at least 30 million Americans will remain without insurance by 2016 under ACA.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact