Anger and frustration over Trumpcare at Louisiana town hall meeting

Tom Hall
1 July 2017

Anger over Trumpcare boiled over Friday at a town hall meeting held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana by Republican Senator Bill Cassidy.

While the official topic of the meeting was flood recovery, in the aftermath of last summer's historic floods in Baton Rouge, the focus of most of the attendees was on the cuts to federal health care spending and the effective abolition of Medicaid as an entitlement program in the bill drafted in secret by Cassidy's fellow Republicans and unveiled last week.

The intense and widespread anger over the mounting attack on health care was reflected in the turnout for the meeting. A multi-racial crowd of some 300 workers, retirees and middle-class people pressed the reluctant senator for answers about the Trump administration's health care bills that are working their way through Congress.

Cassidy has been tabbed as one of the Republicans in the Senate, where the party holds a narrow two-vote majority, who might decide to vote against the so-called "Better Care Reconciliation Act." Various liberal protest groups have promoted the illusion that Cassidy can be induced through popular pressure to "fulfill his Hippocratic Oath" (Cassidy is a former medical doctor) and oppose the bill. The senator, apparently eager not to evoke popular outrage, has made some muted criticisms of certain aspects of the bill, such as language regarding premiums for people with pre-existing conditions.

Whatever his tactical disagreements with the Senate bill may or may not be (he declined to say explicitly whether he supported or opposed the bill during yesterday's town hall), Cassidy fully supports the assault on access to health care. During the 2014 Senate race, for example, he called for raising the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 to 70.

In January, Cassidy cosponsored an alternative bill that would apportion federal health care funding to the states in the form of block grants and allow individual states to decide whether to retain or replace the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare. While this has been presented as a somewhat more "moderate" bill and has little chance of gaining support from other congressional Republicans, it included many of the right-wing provisions in the current bill, including abolishing minimum coverage on Obamacare's private insurance exchanges and limits on premiums for the elderly. It also would implement a 5 percent cut in federal spending across the board.

The conversion of Medicaid to block grants, effectively ending it as a federal entitlement program, has long been a demand of the Republican right and is contained in the Senate bill.

Cassidy's statements on Friday make clear that he is a right-wing opponent of Medicaid. In response to questions from the crowd about how Trumpcare would slash Medicaid spending by nearly $800 billion over 10 years, Cassidy declared that "if you roll back Medicaid eligibility, and instead put people on private insurance, that could be a good thing." He called for ending the expansion of Medicaid under Obamacare and lowering the eligibility threshold from 133 percent to 100 percent of the federal poverty line. He also criticized the fact that employed but poverty-stricken people are eligible for Medicaid benefits under the expansion.

The mood of the crowd was angry and hostile. When Cassidy attempted to portray Medicaid expansion as financially unfeasible, one audience member shouted back, "What about the $500 billion you're giving to the 2 percent?" This met with a round of enthusiastic applause. Several audience members shouted their support for a universal health care system.

© World Socialist Web Site

Cassidy did his best to avoid exposing his real position. To the growing frustration of the audience, he focused mostly on technical aspects of the (paltry) government aid for flood victims, while avoiding the subject of health care for nearly 50 minutes of the scheduled one-hour meeting. “I’m really concerned about pre-existing conditions,” one woman said from the floor. “I flooded last year, but this is why I came.”

Cassidy snapped at audience members for being “uncivil” when they began chanting “health care … health care!” out of frustration. “I’ll tell you what’s rude,” one audience member retorted, “kicking 22 million people off their health care who you know cannot afford it!”

While the Republican bill represents an unprecedented attack on workers’ access to health care, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, support pro-corporate health care “reform.” Obamacare itself, which Trumpcare does not “replace” but builds upon, is a reactionary piece of legislation designed to funnel billions to the insurance corporations and force workers off of employer-sponsored coverage and onto sub-par individual plans purchased on insurance exchanges. The Democrats have put up a toothless opposition to the Republican health care bill while focusing on their right-wing campaign against Russia and media scandals over Trump’s twitter posts.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site