

“The healthcare change was for the billionaires’ benefit”

Retired New York City municipal workers speak out against unions’ deal to degrade health insurance

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On July 1, the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), an umbrella organization of over 100 of New York City’s municipal unions, will announce the health insurance company it has chosen with the Democratic de Blasio administration to manage a privately-run, for-profit plan, called Medicare Advantage, for over 250,000 retirees.

Behind the backs of their members, the unions and the Democrats are ditching the federal Medicare health care insurance for what will amount to a cut-rate program that costs retirees thousands of dollars in out-of-pocket expenses and limits their choice of physicians. The MLC will choose from an array of private health care providers, including Aetna, Emblem Health, or Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield.

The change will save the city over \$600 million this year in costs in health care, part of billion-dollar cuts to health care for retired city workers, including teachers, sanitation workers, administrative workers, parks and public housing workers, and staff and educators from the City University of New York.

Michael, a retired social studies teacher from Bayard Rustin High School in Manhattan, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “It is frightening. They are sugar-coating the change to Medicare Advantage. It is not as widely accepted. Under regular Medicare our liability for a hospital stay is only up to \$1,000 but with Advantage it is \$7,500.

“Medicare Advantage is fine as long as you are healthy. Advantage can deny coverage. I read an article about people taken by ambulance in emergencies to the hospital, with Advantage plans then denying coverage, saying that they are not emergencies. At present, we pay \$150 per person a month for supplemental Medigap but, the best I can tell from what I read, it would become \$400.”

At online meetings held for retirees by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which negotiates for public K-12 educators, and Professional Staff Congress (PSC),

which manages benefits for CUNY faculty and staff, many questions were left unanswered.

It is not clear to retirees, for example, if supplemental insurance for dental, eyeglasses, and drugs, which are not covered by Medicare, will remain as they were. UFT President Michael Mulgrew has promised that all coverage under the current health plan for educators will remain as it is and all doctors who accept Medicare will participate because they will get paid the Medicare rate. Many retirees, however, are concerned that physicians do not want the work and oversight that come from Advantage plans, which can also be subject to changes over time.

The anger among retirees at the municipal unions over this backroom deal is widespread.

One retiree said on a Facebook group, “Nothing about this seems aboveboard. The only way retirees have really heard about it is via people they know. That’s not doing a very good job of informing our members!”

Speaking on the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, which negotiates with the city on behalf of school principals, a retired assistant principal, Gerry, told the WSWs, “The union says, ‘don’t worry’ but otherwise they did not say anything to us.”

On the role of the MLC unions’ collaboration with Mayor de Blasio, Michael, the retired social studies teacher, stated, “This whole thing was done in secret, only leaking out first from people in the PSC union. Negotiations for the plan began three years ago.”

“One of the members of the MLC is a board member of the Emblem Health company, so of course he wants to force us out of Medicare,” Michael said, referring to Gregory Floyd, secretary of the MLC and president of Teamsters Local 237. “This is a conflict of interest. The union should be fighting for us but is fighting for the city.”

“Around the country,” Michael continued, “the unions

oppose single-payer insurance. The UFT is no longer fighting for us. When unions won the dues checkoff, they no longer had to care about you and me. Once the Supreme Court made the Janus decision where workers do not have to pay dues, the union made the decision of ‘who are we going to screw’ based on sacrificing the lower income stream and trading off health care for wage increases. They pit retirees whose dues are about \$240 if their pension is \$60,000 against active members paying \$1,200 dues.”

Retirees understand what they could face with catastrophic health care problems under Medicare Advantage. As one retiree explained on Facebook, “My concern is the fact that I have illness that requires me to take very expensive medicine (Part D pays for it) to keep me alive. Medicare Advantage will most likely find excuses to reject me at every corner of my life. So how do I deal with that?”

Retiree Louise told the WWS, “I am a recently diagnosed cancer patient undergoing treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering, and they do not accept Medicare Advantage. I am extremely worried about what will happen with my treatment if the city switches our coverage. My oncologist has said to me that Medicare is the one insurance that you don’t need approvals first to treat the patient.”

Eric, another retired high school social studies teacher, said, “I think the health care change was for the billionaires’ benefit. I have Parkinson’s disease. It would directly affect me. I see an internist, but I see so many specialists, including movement doctors and neurologists, and I don’t need to go through a primary care physician screening my care for the health insurance company when I already have a good team of doctors. I think they should stay with the status quo. They have all that COVID money coming, so they shouldn’t change anything. The unions should protect the workers. They are not doing their job. It sucks.”

Another retired teacher, Nathaniel, commented, “Union leaders have become a muzzle for their members instead of a voice, just when a megaphone is needed the most because of media concentration. This is because we are deep into the degenerative phase of the Democratic Party. The era of capitalism’s progressive political pluralism is past. With unions and Democrats like this, the Republicans hardly have to do anything. Wall Street gives so much money to the Democrats because it sees the Democrats as their buffer to the working class.”

Michael posed a key question: “If we give in to this major cut for retirees, what will be next? Retirees paid for their healthcare by a career of work. This is happening all over the country to workers because the unions want to keep influence over the workers and maintain a hold on the health care insurance that teachers need instead of having single-payer insurance that would not need them.”

The action by the MLC has national and international significance. It will set a precedent for attacks on the social right to decent health care, not only for retirees, but for in-service workers, and not only for public workers, but for those in private companies as well.

It is imperative that New York City workers take up the fight to unite on a socialist program that defends all the social rights of the working class, from health care and education to the right to safe workplaces and decent living standards.

The anti-worker skulduggery of the MLC shows that the financial elite uses both political parties and the unions as instruments to maintain its profiteering on the backs of the working class.

To fight for their interests, workers in every workplace and community must form rank-and-file action committees to link up an independent political and industrial struggle, and the preparation of a political general strike.

The development of such a rank-and-file committee among 3,000 striking Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, who are currently fighting not only the company but also the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which is seeking to isolate the strike, is an example for municipal workers in New York City and for the international working class.

Educators, university staff, sanitation, parks, public housing and city office workers must make every effort to link up their struggles with the Volvo workers and with every other independent action of workers around the globe. City workers of all classifications can help to develop rank-and-file committees in New York by signing up here.



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