

Battle Still Continues Over Washington's Public Hospital

by Edward Spannaus



Demonstrators protest the closure of D.C. General Hospital, with bodybags to represent those who have died due to the shutdown of the capital's only public hospital. The Longworth House Office Building is in the background.

Although most of the remaining staff at Washington D.C.'s last public hospital, D.C. General, was scheduled to be laid off as of July 14, well over 150 activists and hospital employees made it clear at a July 11 town meeting, that the fight for public health and the general welfare in the District of Columbia is not over. The town meeting, the 24th since January, was designed as "A Salute to D.C. General Hospital and Staff," and its central theme was: "We will not give up until victory is won!" Speaker after speaker emphasized that he or she was determined to continue the fight to restore a public hospital in the District, no matter how long it takes.

In remarks delivered by audiotape to the gathering, Democratic Presidential precandidate Lyndon LaRouche, who has been the key political leader in the battle to save D.C. General, told the activists that "the political situation in the world, in the world economy, and in the politics of the United States is such, that nothing is a 'done deal.'"

"People in the Congress have let us down," LaRouche said, referring to the treachery of the Gore "New Democrats" who have blocked any action in Congress to reverse the illegal privatization of D.C.'s public-health system. "But they're going to be hit again by the issue," he forewarned. "The issue is going to come back."

Coalition leader, and meeting moderator, Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad had opened the meeting by declaring: "We have fought for 24 weeks, for the principle of public health, which is emblematic of the principle of the common good. And we will fight for 24 months, or 24 years, or even 24 generations, if that is necessary." Those attending clearly agreed.

Death Toll Rising

One key reason that the issue of the shutdown of D.C. General is not going away, is the rising death toll in Washington. Coalition leader and LaRouche movement activist Lynne

Speed announced at the July 11 meeting that the death toll is now as high as 20—people whose deaths may be attributable to the closing of D.C. General. Speed stressed that the actual death toll is probably much higher, because the ones which are known are mostly cases of homicides or other incidents for which police records are maintained. But in other cases, involving sudden illness or serious disease, it is much more difficult to obtain information about unnecessary deaths that may have occurred because of lengthy ambulance runs, and overcrowded emergency rooms with overworked staffs.

The highlight of the July 11 meeting was the honoring of D.C. General employees. About 30 hospital employees, ranging from laundry workers to administrators, stood up to

identify themselves and be recognized; most had worked at the hospital for at least one or two decades, and some for 30 to 35 years. All expressed their love for their work, and their dedication to serving all who came through the doors, with the highest quality of medical services.

Dr. Muhammad and others made the point that D.C. General is not bricks-and-mortar; that “what makes it a living, breathing, compassionate institution are the men and women who have dedicated their lives to this institution.”

“We’re here to save that spirit, the spirit of D.C. General,” Dr. Mohammed proclaimed.

In their remarks to the meeting, both LaRouche movement leader Dennis Speed, and civil rights movement veteran

LaRouche: The Issue Is The General Welfare

On July 11, Democratic Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche spoke via audiotape to a meeting in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the Coalition to Save D.C. General Hospital. The meeting was designed as a tribute by the Coalition to the employees of D.C. General, who were all being laid off on Friday, July 13.

This is Lyndon LaRouche speaking to you. I understand this is the penultimate meeting before the official closing of the hospital. I want to say several things which I think may be of relevance to all of you.

First of all, this fight has not ended, not merely because we are going to continue the fight to restore a full-service general public hospital in Washington, D.C., but because the political situation in the world, in the world economy, and in the politics of the United States is such, that nothing is a “done deal.” We’ve already seen the control of the Senate pass to the Democrats from the Republicans. We have seen other developments which show that the present Bush Administration, who are the fanatics for this kind of thing, are being weakened by themselves, by their own actions. They can’t seem to do anything right. This past week, we have seen the stumbling of the world economy into a new phase of downslide. This is not going to get better. It’s going to become worse. Politics in the world, and in the United States, are going to be shaken up.

Health Care Is Emblematic

Now, the issue, is the issue, as I’ve said earlier, of the general welfare. And health care, of course, is emblematic of the general welfare. In the postwar period, with the experience of the 1930s, the experience of wartime medicine, we, in this country, enacted the Hill-Burton Act.

While the progress under that act was not always what we would have wished, nonetheless, we made progress. We had a good national health-care policy under Hill-Burton. Sometimes we didn’t live up to it, but the policy was good. Then, under Nixon, we had a change. The HMO [health maintenance organization] act was brought in to repeal Hill-Burton. And since then, especially since the collapse of New York City, and Big MAC in 1975, what had once been the fine medical system, the medical-care system of cooperation among public and private institutions and physicians, began to be destroyed. And over recent years, it’s been destroyed at an increasing rate.

This has been accompanied by a philosophy which says we don’t care about people, we care about shareholders. We no longer care about public responsibility for the general welfare. And people who are considered not so desirable, will get less care, and will probably depart our company a bit earlier.

We’ve now come to the point that none of us is going to survive, unless we restore the general welfare principle. That is, that government has no moral authority to govern unless it is efficiently committed to defend the general welfare of not only all the population, but also the posterity. This means health care, it means education, it means basic economic infrastructure, as well as the conditions of life under which private enterprise can make its contribution to improvement of the general welfare and general progress.

The fight is going on. The fight is going to get tougher. People in the Congress have let us down. But they’re going to be hit again by the issue. The issue is going to come back. It’s not a done deal; it’s not going to go away. And those of us who stay with the fight have a chance at least of victory in a struggle that is more than justified, and if we can do well enough, we’ll win. This is the beginning, not the end. This time, when we come back, we’re going to have to come back for a general welfare policy, and to restore to this nation a general health-care policy consistent with the intention of Hill-Burton.

Rev. James Bevel, emphasized the individual responsibility that D.C. residents must take to act as true citizens fighting for the general welfare and public health.

Rev. Bevel punctuated his speech on the theme “Citizen or Slave: The Key To Victory”, with several amusing anecdotes of his own civil rights experiences, to compel people to recognize the faults which lie within themselves, which prevent them from acting. If a bunch of crooks can come into the city and take away its only public hospital, Bevel warned—a hospital placed there 200 years ago through the efforts of the Founding Fathers—without a public uproar to stop it, then we have to realize, “something is wrong with us.”

The Coalition has resolved that it will keep meeting, and demanding action from Congress, until it succeeds.

A Political Uproar

The uproar which has already been caused on Capitol Hill by Coalition efforts, is clearly visible. On July 11, D.C.’s non-voting Congressional Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton sent a plainly frantic letter to the head of the D.C. Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee. It protested the inclusion of a provision “ratifying” the D.C. General privatization contract in the subcommittee’s submission to be included as part of the full 2001 Supplemental Appropriations bill. Norton has made clear she supports the privatization and the closing. Her attempt to stop the Committee from ratifying the policy she supports, was clearly because it was puncturing her and other Congressmen’s charade of recent months. Since April, Norton has insisted to all who approached her, that Congress has nothing to do with the D.C. General issue.

In her letter to Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), the chair of the D.C. subcommittee, Norton states that the D.C. General contract is now “operative” and is being implemented, and she goes on: “Any language ratifying the D.C. General contract is both gratuitous and unnecessary and will open wounds that city officials are trying to heal. These matters are particularly inappropriate for Congressional intervention, and we are surprised that such anti-home rule language would be proposed from any member of the new Senate majority.” Norton is desperate to keep the issue from being opened up.

With the full backing of the Gore/“New Democrat” wing of the Democratic Party, Norton has been on an obscene rampage in Congress, demanding that other Members of Congress stay away from the D.C. General issue, which she perversely claims is an issue of “home rule.” (The shutdown of D.C. General was, in fact, dictated by the Congressionally appointed Financial Control Board, over the *unanimous* opposition of the elected D.C. Council.)

How the Dems Were Turned Aside

After the Control Board dictatorially signed the contract and legislation privatizing the D.C. public health system on April 30, momentum was building for Congress to take action to reverse the illegal privatization contract. At the same time, the Gore/Norton forces among Democrats escalated their

threats against Members preparing to take action to save D.C. General. At a Congressional Black Caucus luncheon on May 2, Norton is reported to have thrown a fit, warning all members of the Black Caucus to “stay out of my turf,” and screaming, “this is all LaRouche!”

In mid-May, Congressman David Bonior of Michigan, the House Democratic Whip, placed in the Congressional Record a statement saying that he was “deeply troubled by the process that determined the fate of D.C. General hospital. Through the use of an un-elected control board, those wishing to see the hospital closed overrode the democratically elected D.C. City Council, who unanimously opposed the closure of the hospital.” Several California Congressional Representatives signed a statement, “Time To Draw The Line,” which cited LaRouche’s role in the D.C. General fight. The President of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators sent a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus requesting that action to maintain the hospital be effected. On May 28-29, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo) and Sen. Tom Daschle, now Senate Majority Leader, told public audiences that they were committed to saving D.C. General.

But by the beginning of June, Senators Tim Johnson and Daschle had both pulled back from their support of days earlier, and others began circulating the line that privatization of public hospitals was a great “success” in other cities. This line was quickly traced back to a report being circulated by D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams and others citing the “success stories” in other U.S. cities — which all turned out to be less than successes, even under circumstances far more favorable than those in D.C. In the capital, the public hospital (D.C. General) was dismantled, not just taken over by new, private management as was the case in other cities.

It was evident even before the take-over contract was signed, that the scheme was riddled with corruption. The entity which runs Greater Southeast Community Hospital, the vastly inferior institution supposed to “replace” D.C. General, is Doctors Community Healthcare Corporation—an Arizona-based, for-profit company whose financial arm has been sued for fraud and racketeering in a number of jurisdictions. Its two D.C. holdings—Greater Southeast and Hadley Memorial Hospital—are admitted to be losing at least \$7.5 million a year. The privatization contract executed behind locked doors, under police protection, on April 30, constituted a massive bail-out of Greater Southeast and its parent company.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the closure of D.C. General, Greater Southeast is turning away patients, and people are literally dying on the streets, as ambulances roam the city from one hospital to another, looking for an available emergency room.

The healthcare situation in D.C. can only get worse, until the contract is voided; the coverup by the *Washington Post*’s Katherine Graham and her flunkies such as Eleanor Holmes Norton and Mayor Williams, comes to an end; and a public hospital is restored in the nation’s capital.

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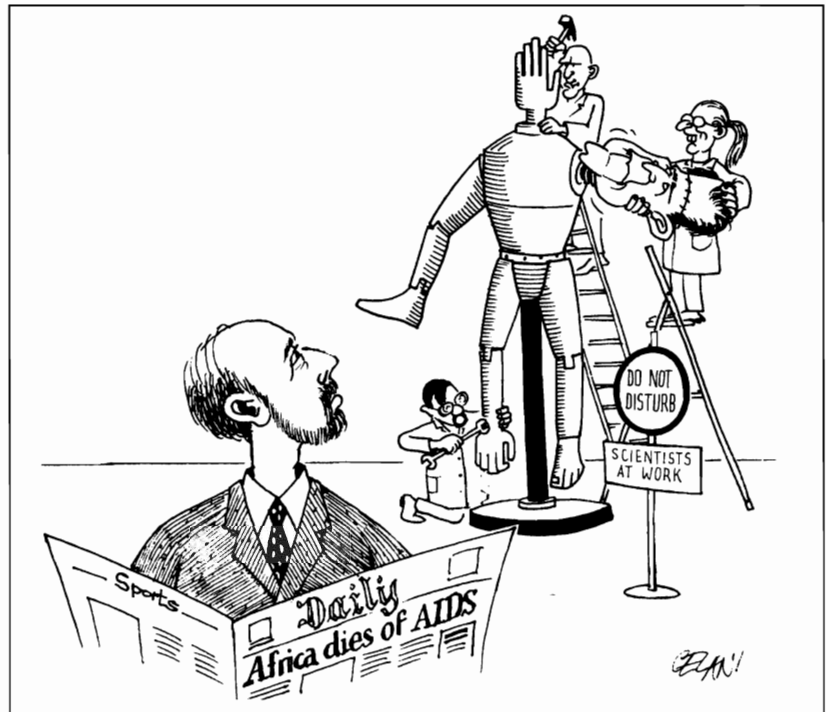


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