

Conyers Launches New Congressional Caucus for National Health Insurance

by Patricia Salisbury

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) announced the formation of a new Congressional caucus June 7 to rally support for his national-health insurance bill, HR 676. Known as “Medicare for All,” the Conyers bill would put the country on a single-payer system to provide coverage for all U.S. residents who sign up for it.

Joining Conyers in a Washington, D.C. breakfast meeting to announce the formation of the caucus, were Reps. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), Mike Honda (D-Calif.), and Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-Tex.). Conyers and other speakers called the fight for universal health care the “new Civil Rights movement.”

Members of the Larouche Youth Movement also attended the gathering. HR 676 was endorsed by Lyndon LaRouche on April 10, when he called the bill a “litmus test” of the morality of Members of Congress. “Those who don’t support the Conyers reform of health care, must be punished by being defeated,” LaRouche said.

The goal of the bill’s supporters, Kucinich told the audience, should be to get it to the floor for a vote in 2007, and into the Democratic Party platform for 2008. His job is to work the House floor to get more support for Conyers’ bill, he said.

McDermott began by taking on what he termed the “smoke and mirrors” approach to the health-care crisis. As an example, he cited the Massachusetts health plan, recently signed by Republican Gov. Mitt Romney, a man with his eye on the GOP Presidential nomination, as just that: “smoke and mirrors.” But, he said, it shows that the issue of health care is so big, that even the Republicans have to take it up. He expects the Bush Administration to come up with a “fig leaf” program, something like the Romney plan that does nothing, which it will call a health plan for all.

McDermott made the urgency of the situation crystal clear when he discussed the auto-sector bankruptcies. Every business bankruptcy today is for the purpose of breaking union contracts and stripping away workers’ benefits, especially health-care benefits, he said. The Delco (now Delphi) bankruptcy was the “canary in the mine,” he stated, and he predicted that General Motors will soon follow Delphi over the

cliff. We cannot face the American population without a universal health-care plan, he told the gathering, and HR 676 is it. Nadler also mentioned the auto industry, saying that GM tells us that it costs \$1,500 per worker, per car, and therefore it’s cheaper for them to produce in Canada. This is unacceptable, Nadler said.

Jackson-Lee said that the crux of civil rights has to be health care for everybody, when they need it, whenever they need it. In Texas, as part of the privatization of medical care, the state outsourced its Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIPS) to a company that did not even have enough phone lines to handle parents calling in to register their children.

Rep. Diane Watson (D-Calif.) reported that more than 10 million people in the United States spent more than 20% of their income on medical care, and more than 6 million spent 33% of their income. Despite these expenditures, she said, the United States ranks 37th in the world in overall health care. Rep. Mike Honda interjected a personal note, saying that when his wife, a teacher, died, he lost his health-insurance coverage. For a lot of others in that situation, he said, it is a lot worse.

Health Groups Speak Out

The meeting also heard from representatives of a number of activist groups, including Dr. Harvey Fernbach of Physicians for a National Health Plan, who scored the HMO (Health Maintenance Organization) industry as pack of loan sharks, pointing out that no other terms apply when 20 to 33% of every dollar for health care is skimmed off into “administrative costs” and profits.

Dr. Jaime Torres of Latinos for National Health Insurance painted a stark picture, from his practice in New York City, of the deaths that result from the criminal negligence of the current HMO/insurance company-dominated system, which will let people die if that fattens their bottom line. Torres reported that there are more than 80,000 deaths a year because of the lack of medical insurance. He recently attended the funeral of a 14-year-old girl who died because the HMO told her mother it would not cover a visit to the



EIRNS/Sharon Stevens

“Medicare for All” is the intention behind HR 676, sponsored by Rep. John Conyers. Conyers and several other Democratic colleagues formed a new Congressional caucus to rally support for the national health insurance bill.

emergency room, since the girl only had the flu. In fact, the girl’s illness was critical, and she died needlessly due to lack of proper care.

Torres quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, who said that of all the forms of inequality, denying health care is the most inexcusable; to make money from the illness of individuals is inhumane.

Chris Townsend, legislative director of the United Electrical Workers, gave an overview of how national unions are working for HR 676. He reported that there is a lockout going on in Philadelphia right now—in a small plant where the employer told the workers that he is tripling their premium payments, and “if you don’t like it, you’re locked out.” Conyers said he will lead a delegation to the picket line and lockout, which has been going on for months.

Wide Popular Support

Most of the speakers made reference to the wide support for Conyers’ plan in the population, which was evidenced by the trade union representation at the event, and the large number of demonstrations taking place around the country. There is more work to do, however, within the House Democratic Caucus. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), when asked if the Caucus leadership would support Conyers’ bill, said, “I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with

that bill.”

After the formal presentations, LaRouche Youth Movement members spoke with Congressmen and other attendees, making the point that the success of HR 676 will depend on a general economic revival, which depends in turn on the immediate introduction and passage of LaRouche’s emergency legislation to save the auto industry, and the removal of synarchist infiltrator Felix Rohatyn from a position of influence in the Democratic Party.

Meanwhile, demonstrations took place around the country in support of the Conyers bill.

- In Gainesville, Florida, dozens of retirees and unionists picketed in front of Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Florida, to dramatize the need for HR 676 at a demonstration called by the Alachua County Labor Party. Jenny Brown, one of the organizers of the picket, told the press that the cost of her Blue Cross coverage had increased 29% in one year, with approval to raise premiums from regulating state agencies. Gov. Jeb Bush’s Florida has the fourth-highest percentage of non-elderly uninsured in the nation (23%), topped only by his brother’s home state of Texas, which leads the nation with 27%, and New Mexico (25%) and Oklahoma (24%).

- Demonstrations at insurance companies are planned in cities in California and Washington state, and in Boston.

- In Wilmington, Delaware, 70 people, mostly members of the United Auto Workers from Newark, rallied in Rodney Square. Amos McCluney, Jr., president of the Delaware Coalition for Health Care Reform and a former union representative at Chrysler, pointed to the flood of the uninsured into emergency rooms to get basic care. These costs, he said, are then shifted to the people who are already paying for private plans.

- In Cleveland, Ohio Democrat Rep. Stephanie Tubbs-Jones, a co-sponsor of HR 676, expressed her support for a demonstration organized by Cleveland Jobs with Justice, noting that there are 1,362,000 uninsured non-elderly in Ohio alone.

- In Pittsburgh, about 100 people from labor organizations and other groups gathered outside the headquarters of insurance giant Highmark Inc., carrying signs reading “Universal Health Care—We Can’t Live Without It.” The event was sponsored by the Western Pennsylvania Coalition for Single-Payer Health Care, one of whose organizers, Ed Grystar, told the media that Highmark represents all that is wrong with the current health-care system.

Demonstrators noted that Highmark reported a surplus of \$2.8 billion in 2005. On the defensive, the company announced its surplus was within the limits considered appropriate by state insurance officials, and that it provided \$140 million to a variety of community programs.