

SINGLE-PAYER PROPONENTS

Ramp Up Campaign

by Mary Layton Atkinson
and Charles Idelson

With the condition of U.S. health care growing more critical each passing day, advocates for a single-payer, universal health care system are stepping up efforts to persuade the American people that real reform requires a radical shift away from the employer-based, private insurance-dominated system in the United States.

Public sentiment may already be there. An October Harris poll, published in the *Wall Street Journal*, found that 75 percent of Americans favored universal health insurance and a nearly unanimous 96 percent of people surveyed support the government-run Medicare system, despite ongoing efforts by the Bush administration and others to privatize it.

In this climate, the time is ripe for a stepped up national effort, and nurses and labor are uniquely positioned to lead the campaign with the active participation of progressive physicians and other community and health care activists, said Rose Ann DeMoro, executive director of the California Nurses Association in December.

DeMoro spoke to 200 physicians, medical students and supporters at the annual Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP) convention in Philadelphia, where she received the Dr. Quentin Young Health Activist Award for her “peerless and courageous leadership in the national movement for single-payer health care for all.”

Dr. Young, national coordinator of PNHP and a lifelong leader in the fight for a more humane health care system, presented the award saluting DeMoro and CNA for the recent successful chal-

lenge to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and he emphasized the critical role that labor has to play in winning a single-payer system.

“It’s a matter of historic fact that every one of the other industrialized democratic countries that enjoy some form of national health insurance” achieved that with the leading role of labor, either through unions or a labor party, Young reiterated to *REVOLUTION* afterwards.

In her presentation, DeMoro noted that delegates to the CNA biennial convention in September had voted to authorize the organization to pursue an affiliation with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the national labor federation representing some 9 million working people, in large part to promote a campaign for a national health care system.

Since that time, DeMoro said, CNA has been talking to national union leaders and found “very encouraging results. More and more unions are committed to supporting a single-payer system, based on a single standard of care for all, and are willing to do the hard work that is necessary to achieve this critical goal for their members and all Americans who deserve a universal, high-quality health care system. I am very optimistic.”

As an example of what labor can achieve, DeMoro described the 10-year campaign to win Medicare that was launched by the AFL-CIO, and won in 1965 with the AFL-CIO playing a leading role. Along the way, the unions mounted a massive grassroots campaign



CNA Executive Director Rose Ann DeMoro receives the Dr. Quentin Young Health Activist Award for her “peerless and courageous leadership in the national movement for single-payer health care for all” from Dr. Young at the PNHP conference in Philadelphia.

that included educational conferences and workshops for union members, public forums, media outreach and advertising campaigns, coalition building and a huge lobbying effort.

As a potential model for a new campaign to win national health care, DeMoro described CNA’s challenge to Schwarzenegger after he acted to roll back the state’s landmark law requiring safe registered nurse staffing ratios. The CNA campaign spread into a broad, statewide movement that ultimately won both the ratio fight and defeated a series of initiatives proposed by Schwarzenegger.

At the center of the entire campaign, she noted, was “the public credibility of nurses.” DeMoro cited the latest Gallup poll findings that nurses top public opinion ratings of the most hon-

est and ethical professions, a position nurses have held for six of the past seven years. The public trust in nurses is an essential factor in helping win single payer, she noted.

“When we have a powerful growing union (CNA) that is clear eyed and uncompromising in seeking this goal, which excludes corporate domination of our health system, we are very proud,” Young commented after the speech. “We look forward to the closest possible solidarity with the nurses and to working cooperatively in the common struggle.”

Young said that if DeMoro and CNA succeed in their goal of helping move the labor movement toward adopting a national health care system

system. PNHP reports that of the \$1.7 trillion our nation spends on health care (15.3 percent of our gross domestic product), \$400 billion goes toward the cost of paper work and administration.

Under Conyers’ Medicare-for-all plan, administrative overhead could be reduced by about \$150 billion. The savings come largely from the reduced billing and marketing expenses associated with a private health care provider.

Under the current U.S. system, while money is being diverted from the delivery of care to cover mounting administrative costs, the number of uninsured Americans has grown to approximately 45 million and is continuing to swell. This is due largely to reductions in employer-provided bene-

Still, in negotiating contracts with these companies, labor unions have been forced to recognize the difficult position employers face – how do they provide adequate health packages while remaining competitive in a market where many other firms do not provide benefits?

A single-payer system would level the playing field.

The NHIA, which now has 56 co-sponsors, proposes financing such a system primarily through a 3.3 percent payroll tax on all employers and a 5 percent health tax for the top 5 percent of income earners. Additionally, the bill would place a small tax on stock and bond transfers, close corporate tax loopholes, and repeal the Bush tax cut.

“Under this proposal,” Rep. Conyers’ Web site states, “the average costs to employers for an employee making \$30,000 per year will be reduced to \$1,155 per year, less than \$100 per month.”

Young told *REVOLUTION* that single-payer advocates are “beginning to see signs in the business community” of a willingness to embrace fundamental change, a reversal from “the self destructive way they have resisted.” The result of that opposition, said Young, has been to make many of those companies “increasingly non-competitive with other countries” and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

“We need to see a wakeup call from American business and the corporate community,” said Young. “But the ultimate vehicle is the American people. They have to be organized at the grassroots to make certain their representatives understand what has to be done and, if it is not done, that they will be replaced.”

For more information on H.R. 676, go to www.house.gov/conyers/news_health_care.html

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as a key goal, “we will have taken a giant step” toward the health care reform needed in this country.

Much of the national effort will focus on H.R. 676, the National Health Insurance Act (NHIA), introduced in Congress by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), to extend Medicare to all U.S. residents. Many in labor are beginning to voice support for the bill, which PNHP also has endorsed. It includes provisions to improve the existing Medicare program by providing high-quality primary care, dental, mental health, prescription drugs and long-term care.

One of the key problems single payer seeks to address is the massive inefficiency of the current health care

fits, spurred by mounting insurance premiums. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 60 percent of employers provide health benefits today, compared with 69 percent in 2000.

Particularly galling has been the complicity of the U.S. courts in upholding the rights of employers to strip workers of benefits. Speaking to a rally in support of more than 2,000 Horizon coal miners and retirees who would lose health and retirement benefits in a bankruptcy court ruling, United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts declared, “It’s time right now to make part of this fight national single-payer health care for every citizen of this country because this (type of case) is happening over and over and over.”