Senate Republicans Try, Try, and Fail Again at Affordable Care Act Repeal

After returning from the July 4 break, the Republican-controlled Senate quickly picked up where they left off with their efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Fortunately for the American people (most notably those countless Americans who have benefited from the ACA), the chaos, horse-trading and egos among the Republican majority, sunk their efforts not once but twice in a mere 12-hour period. On Tuesday, June 18, Republican efforts to move forward the “Better Care Reconciliation Act of 2017” (Trumpcare) collapsed after Senators Jerry Moran (R-Kan.), Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Sue Collins (R-Maine), among others, announced they could not support the failing legislation.

In addition to the public’s overwhelming opposition to the bill, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell couldn’t bring together the diverging opinions in his caucus over whether the legislation went too far by slashing Medicaid or did not go far enough to completely uproot the Affordable Care Act.

Despite the apparent failure of “Trumpcare,” the intentions of the Republican-controlled Congress remain. While it doesn’t appear they have the votes to accomplish it, some are adamant about trying to move forward a “clean” repeal bill that would destroy the ACA without an immediate effort to replace the legislation.

Meanwhile, progressives, labor unions and advocates are celebrating the temporary reprieve while hunkering down for another obvious fight over the recently-proposed House Budget that will gut Medicaid and end traditional Medicare while making devastating cuts to vital programs like the Occupational Safety and Health and Mine Safety and Health administrations.

Agreeing with our allies at the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, we believe that “with threats coming thick and fast from both houses of Congress, we can’t blink. We must remain vigilant against ongoing and aggressive efforts to target our nation’s social safety net programs in order to cut spending and use the savings to pay for massive tax breaks for wealthy Americans.”

(e-mail communication from NCPSSM, 7/19/17.)
I am writing this article while trying to come to grips with the news of another shooting, this time in Washington, D.C., involving elected government officials. Many of the people interviewed on TV spoke about their concern as to the way we as a nation have become divided and how we act. It is interesting that while many people talk about the need to temper down the discourse, the need is primarily directed at the other party as being the problem, rather than the need to modify each party’s behavior.

I believe some of the vitriol could be reduced if TV and radio stations were to go back to the ‘80s and present opposing viewpoints in a civilized manner. Prior to 1987, the FCC enforced a policy called the Fairness Doctrine. Wikipedia identifies the Fairness Doctrine as “An FCC policy that required the holders of broadcast licenses both to present controversial issues of public importance and to do so in a manner that was honest, equitable and balanced. The Fairness Doctrine had two basic elements: it required broadcasters to devote some of their airtime to discussing controversial matters of public interest, and to air contrasting views regarding those matters. The Doctrine did not require equal time for opposing views but required contrasting viewpoints be presented.”

We spend too much time talking and listening only to people who share our viewpoint or listening to stations that will enforce our beliefs. It has not helped that for at least the last two redistricting alignments states have put like-minded people into the same congressional districts, leading to more polarization of opinions and the election of representatives who are as narrow-minded as the group they represent.

I, above all people, certainly do not have all of the answers to bring civility back to American politics, but eliminating the gerrymandering of congressional districts and reinstituting the Fairness Doctrine would certainly be a step in the right direction.

FROM THE PRESIDENT’S DESK
Bring Civility Back to America

Bill Pienta

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S DESK
New Kid on the Block—Greetings from Pittsburgh!

Julie Stein

You probably know by now that Jim Centner, the former Director of SOAR, retired effective June 1. I am greatly honored to have been appointed by USW International President Leo W. Gerard, to assume Jim’s former responsibilities and I am excited to take on this new role.

I wish Jim and his wife Carol a long, happy and healthy retirement—they’ve earned it!

Initially, I was planning on committing my first message in support of our fight to defeat the Better Care Reconciliation Act of 2017 (Trumpcare). Instead, I now have the privilege of thanking the Republican-controlled Congress for their inability to coalesce in their efforts to destroy the Affordable Care Act. The labor movement, health care advocates and our allies worked tirelessly to defeat this legislation, because it would have rewritten our nation’s laws in favor of health insurance companies.

Some Republicans are still pledging to move forward legislation to repeal the ACA without a replacement. However, we all know that such a proposal would not be an attempt to expand access to health care in America; but, rather a taxpayer funded handout to the rich and the pharmaceutical companies. If successful, our relatives and friends would be hit with exorbitant premiums and out-of-pocket costs. Their health will deteriorate, and when they arrive at the doorstep of Medicare, they may be in worse condition—which can increase the financial burden on Medicare.

So, we must remain even more vigilant than those who are working every day to destroy vital programs like Social Security and Medicare. Our union’s effort to defeat this and other anti-worker legislation is most commonly the work of our union’s Rapid Response department. I’ve had the privilege to work closely with Rapid Response, and have witnessed the tremendous work that they do to advance legislation that will benefit workers and their families. Rapid Response’s work was integral in our success in stopping the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Moving forward, we’re encouraging SOAR members to be actively involved with our Rapid Response program. To find out more about Rapid Response efforts in your district, contact your USW District Rapid Response coordinator (see Article page 1).

I’d also encourage you to visit our updated SOAR website (www.usw.org/soar) for more information about how you can continue to be involved in our union.

Join with us, as we continue the fight to protect and enhance the quality of life of our retirees and working families. Together We Stand Strong!
USW International President Leo W. Gerard appointed Jim Centner to serve as a United Steelworkers representative to the board of the Alliance for Retired Americans. He recently retired from the United Steelworkers, where he served as the SOAR Director for the last 16 years.

Jim previously served on this board as the Retiree Director for the union, a position he vacated upon his retirement. He was a founding member of the Alliance and played an instrumental role in establishing this organization as one of the leaders in the fight to protect and enhance the quality of life of retired Americans.

Upon accepting the appointment, Centner stated, “I was honored by this appointment and look forward to my continued involvement with the Alliance for Retired Americans. These are difficult times for retirees. The withering away of defined benefit pensions, combined with the constant assault on Social Security and Medicare, is a clarion call to action. We must be engaged in the battle if we are to survive. The Alliance is well-suited to coordinate this fight and I look forward to being a part of it.”

Jim and his wife Carol reside in Venice, Florida. They have two daughters, one son and eight grandchildren.

**Former SOAR Director Appointed to Alliance Board**

Jim Centner

**District 7 SOAR to Governor Rauner: “Do your job!”**

By Scott Marshall

In June, District 7 SOAR members joined other unions and retiree organizations in picketing Illinois’ Republican Governor Bruce Rauner; when he was meeting privately with corporate executives and local Chamber of Commerce officials at a local establishment in Chicago.

In an attempt to evade the press and our picketing, Rauner tried to sneak out the back door of the establishment. As we chanted, “Do your job! Do your job!,” his security detail rushed him into his limo and then raced down the alley.

District 7 SOAR involvement received some great coverage on the local news following the ordeal.

Throughout his first term, SOAR members in Illinois have been active in protesting Rauner’s attacks on labor. Rauner has pushed a whole raft of anti-labor “reforms” including allowing local governments to opt out of collective bargaining. For three years he’s refused to negotiate a state budget which has resulted in many state workers being laid off and the subsequent loss of vital social services for the poor and seniors.

We have our work cut out for us, and you can be sure that we are going to continue to confront Rauner at every turn, and alley.

Pictured are SOAR members: Scott Marshall, at far left; Linda Ruxton, SOAR 31-9, holding the “We need a budget now!” sign; and, next to her, Jim Lange, also SOAR 31-9.

**District 7 SOAR to Governor Rauner: “Do your job!”**
We Can’t ‘Bear’ to Lose Medicare

Recently released studies on the creeping privatization of our Canadian health care system and the double billing by some doctors and private clinics is alarming and should give us all cause for concern.

In an effort to raise awareness of these concerns, the Ontario Health Coalition has launched the We Can’t ‘Bear’ to Lose Medicare tour of communities across Ontario, featuring a giant teddy at public rallies.

We are proud of our SOAR Chapter 6-16 President Don Arkell and Vice President Peter Boyle for taking active roles in this public awareness campaign.

The following article by Ontario Health Coalition Executive Director Natalie Mehra makes the case for strengthening our public hospitals: (reprinted with permission)

Private clinic reality check: No more excuses… it’s time to rebuild capacity in our public hospitals

In the Globe and Mail newspaper this weekend, physicians who are extra-billing patients for services at private clinics justified themselves by complaining that they cannot get operating room time and waits are too long in the public system.

Let’s be honest, these problems do exist. But these problems do not justify double-billing—charging the public health care system and patients as well—for health care. They do not justify breaking Canadian laws that are meant to provide equity and protect patients from user fees when they are sick, elderly and least able to pay. And they do not justify charging two times, three times, five times or even more what the public system pays for health care services to seniors and patients when they are sick and in need.

At the Ontario Health Coalition, we have been advocating for 10 years to stop the cuts and reinvest in our public hospitals. We have led this fight, which we know is overwhelmingly supported by the public. But in all these years of advocating to save and improve services in our public hospitals, the private clinic owners that are justifying their extra-billing of patients by complaining about access to operating room time have been nowhere in sight. They have not joined in the fight to save local hospitals from closure, I have not seen them advocating to improve public hospital funding, to build public capacity, nor to ensure that funding goes to care.

For two decades, pro-privatization pundits, clinic owners and politicians claimed that it doesn’t matter if services are owned and controlled by for-profit entities or public and non-profit hospitals. Private clinics, they promised, would exist under Canada’s public medicare laws without causing harm. They would, on every occasion, avow that private clinics are beneficial and health care would not rely on your credit card.

They were not telling the truth. Over the two decades or more in which Canadian provinces have experimented with privatization, the attempt to regulate private clinics has failed. Illegal billing, double-billing and quality problems have become widespread. The clinics are violating the laws of Canada and the provinces as a business model because doing so increases their (already substantial) incomes and profits.

The evidence is indisputable. In 2008, we called every private clinic in Canada. We researched and wrote a report “Eroding Public Health Care: Lessons and Consequences of For-Profit Health Care Across Canada.” In it, we published the notes from our calls with the private clinics, showing that the vast majority were violating the Canada Health Act.

Again in 2014, we called all the private clinics in Ontario, and we found that the clinics continued to break Canada’s medicare laws. If anything, the majority of clinics had become more manipulative and unethical in the information that they were giving to patients to “sell-up” medically unnecessary add-ons.

continued on page 5

BACK to SCHOOL

It is true; you are never too old to learn.

SOAR Chapter 3-09 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, recently held a driving refresher course for members.

Twenty-five members participated in the Canada Safety Council’s 55 Alive Driver Refresher Course. Sponsored by the Saskatchewan Government Insurance Program, the course is free to drivers 55 and over.

Taking driving seriously as we age is a prudent step for our own safety, and that of other drivers and pedestrians. Most of us learned to drive in our teens, usually at the wheel of the family car with a family member providing instruction. Today most young drivers are given proper driving instruction and follow a graduated licensing system.

Given the realities of age-related health issues and bad driving habits that creep in over the years, the refresher course is a wise endeavor by Chapter 3-09 and one worth consideration by other chapters.

Chapter 3-09 members in Saskatoon attend the 55 Alive Driver Refresher Course.
Physicians, nurses and health professionals from Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec have organized themselves to ask governments to stop privatization on behalf of their patients. Almost half a-million patients in Quebec filed a petition with the federal court to force the Health Minister to uphold Canada’s medicare laws and stop the burgeoning user fees charged at private clinics in that province. Now, we have released our latest surveys of 136 clinics and 400 patients which again prove that the transgressions are not the exception among private clinics—they are the rule and they are causing hardship for patients.

Now that the private clinic owners are caught breaking the laws that they said they would not threaten, they want politicians to legalize their illegal activities and simply regulate extra-billing. So far, the record on regulation is abysmal.

Private clinics are using failures in public policy as cover for their unethical behaviour. But their critique of what is happening in our public system is not entirely wrong. The solution is not to throw out public medicare and the protections against user fees and financial hardship that it affords to patients. The solution is to open unused capacity in our public operating rooms and diagnostic suites, use sound population planning processes to plan public hospital capacity to meet our communities’ needs, adopt innovations in wait time management and the organization of services to improve access, and roll contracts back in to our local public hospitals.

Privatization is a failure. It’s time to rebuild capacity in our community hospitals that operate on a non-profit basis in the public interest and insist that our governments plan for and resource our public hospitals to provide the services we need.

— Natalie Mehra, June 12, 2017

United Steelworkers members have read countless times in this space about the “steel import crisis” caused by China and other nations which have been dumping their steel products into the American market. These unfair, malicious actions have caused the loss of thousands of American steel jobs while forcing many U.S. steel companies to idle or shut down their mills.

These foreign entities are now doing the same damage to America’s aluminum industry.

How important are these actions? In addition to the loss of jobs, the imports are destroying both the U.S. steel and aluminum industries; putting our nation’s national security in grave danger.

Brigadier General John Adams, U.S. Army (Ret.), sent a message to Alliance for American Manufacturing supporters in mid-June to encourage them to take action by contacting President Trump and members of Congress about this dilemma. The letter is as follows:

“We’ve heard a lot about Russia lately.
“But did you know that steel and aluminum imports from Russia—and other countries like China—are putting our security at risk?
“Steel and aluminum are vital for America’s national defense and critical infrastructure. But a flood of unfairly traded imports has led to dozens of plant closures and tens of thousands of layoffs.
“We do not want to have to rely on potential adversaries like Russia or China to get the steel and aluminum we need to build our aircraft carriers, battleships, tanks and fighter jets.
“Right now, the Commerce Department is reviewing whether steel and aluminum imports threaten our national defense. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross is likely to send recommendations to the White House by the end of June, and the president could act.
“Steel and aluminum manufacturers and workers cannot wait much longer.
“There’s now just one American smelter that can produce the high-purity aluminum needed for the F-35 fighter jet. There’s now just one U.S. steel manufacturer who can make high-end, grain-oriented electrical steel, essential for transmission and distribution transformers for all types of energy.
“It’s because of foreign imports, many of which are heavily subsidized and even government owned. These imports are dumped into the U.S. market at prices far below fair value.
“American companies operate in a free marketplace. They can’t compete against the Russian or Chinese governments. Many steel and aluminum makers have closed plants, laid off workers or gone out of business entirely.
“If we don’t step up, America’s entire steel and aluminum industries could disappear. We’d have to rely on Russia and China for our national defense needs. Can you even imagine?”

No, we can’t and that’s why AAM is asking all SOAR and USW members to make their voices heard. 

President Trump promised to restore these American industries. Let’s make sure he keeps his word.

Please visit www.americanmanufacturing.org and sign a letter to President Trump and Congress supporting the American steel and aluminum supply chain. We can’t afford not to stand up and be counted.

Jeff Bonior is a staff writer for the Alliance for American Manufacturing
The Free Press:
Our Constitutional Safety Net

How fortunate it is that our founding fathers included Freedom of the Press in the Constitution. Without their thoughtful action, Americans would be deprived of one of the most essential pillars to a free and democratic society: the right to a free and independent press.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing an assault on that vital institution by the Trump administration and a growing number of Congressional leaders that seek to stifle public discourse in an effort to advance the interests of those who funded their campaigns with unlimited sums of money.

The Republican president and Republican-controlled House and Senate have tried to make an undeniable ideological footprint on the future of White House press briefings. During the week of June 15, the Senate tried to put controls on journalists interviewing members, a regular process in the Capital and hallways of Congressional offices. Thankfully, due to the press fighting back, backed by public opinion and constitutional scholars, there was a shift in the White House and in Congress to moderate their efforts to erode our press freedoms.

Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), the ranking minority member of the Senate Rules Committee, opposed the change in procedures that would require the press to obtain permission from the Rules Committee before conducting interviews with Senators. Several Democratic Senators joined Klobuchar in the chorus of opposition. Even Senator Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) admitted to the Huffington Post that reporters are “a kind of pain in the ass” (but) he didn’t mind them hanging around to ask questions.

We depend on the media to thoroughly interview or investigate our president and legislators regarding issues or events and report their findings to the general public. There is no place for the political intervention by any party to obstruct, weaken or deny this Constitutional right. Hats off to our founding fathers for their amazing foresight and solidarity with those who continue to fight every day to ensure a free and independent press.

Thank You, SOAR!

On behalf of Rapid Response, we would like to extend a thank you to the SOAR chapters and retirees who took part in our recent action to protect overtime wages. The critical gains that we made with the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 are being threatened by deceptive legislation that would replace our guaranteed overtime wages with a new, flawed comp time system.

In total, over 60,000 active and retired members signed petitions that are being delivered to Senators right now. SOAR activists have been joining in the delivery meetings to discuss this Comp Time bill and other important issues. In District 13, Sub-District 2 SOAR Coordinator Dan Henry joined active members and the District Rapid Response Coordinator, Andy Frye, for a recent meeting with Senator Tom Cotton’s (R-Ariz.) staff.

“it’s great having SOAR involved in these fights. Their experience brings important perspective to the legislative work of our union. It’s helping to protect the gains we’ve made and to secure a better future for the next generation,” notes Frye.
By Robert Roach, Jr.

Americans are frustrated with prescription drug prices, and rightly so.

President Trump says he wants to control the out-of-control, spiraling prices. Senior administration officials met recently to discuss an executive order on the cost of pharmaceuticals at a roundtable called the “Drug Pricing and Innovation Working Group.”

Most of the policies discussed would not ease patient costs, and at least one would increase prices, say experts who reviewed the documents at the request of Kaiser Health News. Part of the administration’s approach is to strengthen the monopoly power of pharmaceutical companies.

Another plan is to extend the patent life of drugs in foreign markets. Extending monopoly protections for drugs overseas has been one of the pharmaceutical industry’s top priorities since the Trans-Pacific Partnership was defeated last year.

Currently, insurers and pharmacy benefit managers can negotiate bigger rebates and discounts from companies for drugs, but these price reductions do not reach Medicare beneficiaries.

While Americans with private health insurance plans benefit from these negotiated rebates, Medicare Part D requires that beneficiaries pay a percentage of the drug’s list price that does not include the rebate amount.

Many prescription drugs are simply unaffordable to seniors and the complicated behind-the-scenes rebate negotiation process only harms seniors further. Medicare therefore pays inflated prices, which increase out-of-pocket premiums for beneficiaries and push them into the “doughnut hole” faster.

It is an embarrassment to our nation that there are people who have to choose between food and medicine on a daily basis.

That is why the Alliance insists that Medicare be given the authority to negotiate drug prices for all of its beneficiaries to truly save money for seniors.

Robert Roach, Jr. is president of the Alliance for Retired Americans. He was previously the General Secretary-Treasurer of the IAMAW.

For more information, visit www.retiredamericans.org.

**HEPATITIS C: A silent epidemic among baby boomers**

If you were born between 1945 and 1965 you could be one of more than two million baby boomers living with hepatitis C in the U.S. and not even know it.

Hepatitis C affects 1 in 30 baby boomers, accounting for more than 75 percent of cases in the U.S. Hepatitis C is a serious liver condition that results from infection with the hepatitis C virus. Seventy to 85 percent of those with hepatitis C develop a chronic infection, which can lead to liver disease, liver cancer, and even death. Hepatitis C is often referred to as a “silent epidemic,” since a person can have the condition for decades without any symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates baby boomers are five times more likely to have hepatitis C than the rest of the population. While it’s not completely clear why baby boomers have high rates of the virus, some could have been infected from contact with contaminated blood by transfusions, tattoo needles, or ear piercings before safety precautions were adopted.

Given the high frequency of the virus among baby boomers, the CDC recommends all baby boomers speak with their health care providers and request to be tested for hepatitis C. The only way to know if someone has the virus is through a one-time blood test.

While medications can cure more than 90 percent of hepatitis C infections, the biggest barrier is diagnosis, given the lack of noticeable symptoms. The delay in diagnosis and treatment has been a contributing factor to half of the cases of liver cancer in the United States, the occurrence of which increased by 72 percent from 2003 to 2012.

To learn more about baby boomers and hepatitis C, visit KnowAboutHepC.com and cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis/.
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