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Do the Right Thing

A message to House Democrats: This is your moment of truth. You can do the right thing and pass the Senate health care bill. Or you can look for an easy way out, make excuses and fail the test of history.

The Republican victory in the Massachusetts special election means that Democrats can't send a modified health care bill back to the Senate. That's a shame because the bill that would have emerged from House-Senate negotiations would have been better than the bill the Senate has already passed. But the Senate bill is much, much better than nothing. And all that has to happen to make it law is for the House to pass the same bill, and send it to President Obama's desk.

Right now, Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House, says that she doesn't have the votes to pass the Senate bill. But there is no good alternative. Some are urging Democrats to scale back their proposals in the hope of gaining Republican support. But anyone who thinks that would work must have spent the past year living on another planet. The fact is that the Senate bill is a centrist document, which moderate Republicans should find entirely acceptable. In fact, it's very similar to the plan Mitt Romney introduced in Massachusetts just a few years ago. Yet it has faced lock-step opposition from the G.O.P., which is determined to prevent Democrats from achieving any successes. Why would this change now that Republicans think they're on a roll? Alternatively, some call for breaking the health care plan into pieces so that the Senate can vote the popular pieces into law. But anyone who thinks that would work hasn't paid attention to the actual policy issues.

Think of health care reform as being like a three-legged stool. You would, rightly, ridicule anyone who proposed saving money by leaving off one or two of the legs. Well, those

who propose doing only the popular pieces of health care reform deserve the same kind of ridicule. Reform won't work unless all the essential pieces are in place.

Suppose, for example, that Congress took the advice of those who want to ban insurance discrimination on the basis of medical history, and stopped there. What would happen next? The answer, as any health care economist will tell you, is that if Congress didn't simultaneously require that healthy people buy insurance, there would be a "death spiral": healthier Americans would choose not to buy insurance, leading to high premiums for those who remain, driving out more people, and so on. And if Congress tried to avoid the death spiral by requiring that healthy Americans buy insurance, it would have to offer financial aid to lower-income families to make that insurance affordable — aid at least as generous as that in the Senate bill. There just isn't any way to do reform on a smaller scale.

So reaching out to Republicans won't work, and neither will trying to pass only the crowd-pleasing pieces of reform. What about the suggestion that Democrats use reconciliation — the Senate procedure for finalizing budget legislation, which bypasses the filibuster — to enact health reform? That's a real option, which may become necessary (and could be used to improve the Senate bill after the fact). But reconciliation, which is basically limited to matters of taxing and spending, probably can't be used to enact many important aspects of reform. In fact, it's not even clear if it could be used to ban discrimination based on medical history.

Finally, some Democrats want to just give up on the whole thing.

That would be an act of utter political folly. It wouldn't protect Democrats from charges that they voted for "socialist" health care — remember, both houses of Congress have already passed reform. All it would do is solidify the public perception of Democrats as hapless and ineffectual. And anyway, politics is supposed to be about achieving something more than your own re-election. America desperately needs health care reform; it would be a betrayal of trust if Democrats fold simply because they hope (wrongly) that this would slightly reduce their losses in the midterm elections.

Now, part of Democrats' problem since last week's special election has been that they have been waiting in vain for leadership from the White House, where Mr. Obama has conspicuously failed to rise to the occasion. But members of Congress, who were sent to Washington to serve the public, don't have the right to hide behind the president's passivity. Bear in mind that the horrors of health insurance — outrageous premiums, coverage denied to those who need it most and dropped when you actually get sick — will get only worse if reform fails, and insurance companies know that they're off the hook. And voters will blame politicians who, when they had a chance to do something, made excuses instead. **Ladies and gentlemen, the nation is waiting. Stop whining, and do what needs to be done.**

*Paul Krugman emphasis added
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Union News



AFL-CIO News service, graphic(s) added

TSA Nominee Southers Withdraws, Citing ‘Partisan Climate’ That Risks U.S. Security: Erroll Southers, the choice of President Obama to head the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and whose nomination was held hostage by Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) because DeMint opposes allowing TSA workers the freedom to form a union, withdrew his name from consideration this week. During the 2008 campaign, Obama pledged to make bargaining rights for TSA workers a priority. In 2003, President George W. Bush took bargaining rights away from transportation security officers (TSOs) and other workers at the TSA in one of the first shots in his war on America’s workers. DeMint has even made the ludicrous claim that if TSOs were allowed to unionize, national security would be put at risk and terrorist attacks on the United States could increase.



Honor Fallen Workers with Memorial Brick at Labor College Site: Construction of the National Workers Memorial to honor individuals killed on the job is under way at the National Labor College (NLC). Dedicated last April on Workers Memorial Day, the memorial with more than 10,000 bricks and scores of granite benches and pavers will be finished in time to commemorate this year’s Workers Memorial Day, April 28th. If you would like to have a brick or other remembrance engraved and

installed in time for this year’s ceremonies at the campus in Silver Spring, Md., you need to purchase them by Feb. 28. Memorial bricks may be purchased for \$125, pavers for \$2,000 and granite benches for \$10,000. For more information, [click here](#).

Read the rest of this entry »

Olympic Sportswear Producers in Race to Bottom: As the Winter Olympics approaches, an international coalition of workers' rights organizations has released its rating of corporate efforts to eliminate sweatshop abuses in their global supply chains. The ratings are based on the responses of the sportswear companies, including Nike, Adidas, Puma and others, to a series of demands put forward by the coalition on the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The demands include developing a positive climate for workers to join unions and bargain contracts and paying workers a living wage. You can find the company survey responses and ads here. Take action by sending a letter here to the sportswear brands, telling them, "It's time to up your game and start clearing the hurdles for workers' rights."



UAW Donates \$500,000 to Haiti Relief as Unions Continue Strong Aid Efforts: Despite the impact of one of the worse recessions in U.S. history, union members continue to generously support efforts to help survivors of the devastating earthquake in Haiti. You can take action now to help the Haitian survivors by clicking on the AFL-CIO Haitian Disaster Relief site here. The UAW yesterday announced it is donating \$500,000 to the William J. Clinton Foundation to help victims of the

earthquake. Says UAW President Ron Gettelfinger: *The people of Haiti desperately need food, water, medical care and hope. The women and men of the UAW stand with thousands of other organizations and ordinary citizens in their desire to help the Haitian people meet their basic human needs.*

Activists to Discuss New Catholic Hospital Organizing Rules: Seven months after the U.S. Catholic Church released guidelines aimed at improving sometimes bitter relations between workers and management in Catholic hospitals, the church's social activists will learn how well the guidelines are working and what more can be done to ensure justice for workers. Paul Booth, executive assistant to AFSCME President Gerald McEntee, and John Carr, executive director of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, will lead a panel on the guidelines Feb. 6 at the Catholic Labor Network Gathering in Washington, D.C.



Ironworker Sworn in as N.J. State Senate President: Steve Sweeney, a member of Ironworkers Local 399 and one of the early graduates of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO's Labor Candidates School, was sworn in last week as president of the New Jersey State Senate. Sweeney, who was first elected to the State Senate in 2001, is the first union member to serve as president of the upper chamber. He said at his swearing-in ceremony: *"I accept this task with great humility and an ironclad belief that New Jersey's*

best days are ahead of us. I will bring the work ethic here that I did in my career as an ironworker."

It's Official, Corporations Rule



People have been wondering for years who run our country. People or wealthy corporations? Last week the Supreme Court settled the debate.

That decision, *Citizens United v. FEC*, comes down decisively on the corporate side. It gives advertisers more power than voters, and tilts the balance of power even farther towards wealthy and corporate interests. The newly composed conservative court upset decades of precedent and settled expectations. As Justice Stevens says in dissent:

Congress has placed special limitations on campaign spending by corporations ever since the passage of the Tillman Act in 1907. We have unanimously concluded that this “reflects a permissible assessment of the dangers posed by those entities to the electoral process,” *FEC v. NRWC* (1982), and have accepted the “legislative judgment that the special characteristics of the corporate structure require particularly careful regulation.” (Citations compressed).

Last Week’s decision turns paper corporations into actual people, and gives advertisers more constitutional protection than voters. Progressives can’t give up in the face of this setback. Bill Scher and Ralph Nader have called for a constitutional amendment. I’m all for it ... though I think we can find easier solutions. We can start by publicly finance campaigns, and add public matches to any private funding raised. Adding speech rather than subtracting it avoids constitutional hurdles.

Money has always had power, and always will. The theory of our capitalist democracy is that people voting provides a counterbalance. If money controls business and it controls the ballot box, we’re all in trouble.

All of this reminds me of a scene in my novel, *2044*. Our hero finds herself in a political fundraiser, where her boss is raising money for a campaign. “Why bother voting?” she asks. “Because it’s a democracy. The process is crucial. If we didn’t have elections people would lose faith in the government, and that wouldn’t suit anybody. Besides, it’s great fun. Get yourself a drink.

Eric Lotke is the author of 2044, a novel describing a world of consolidated multi-national corporations, mass produced culture and too much stuff.