

The Power of Labor in California's Battle for Single Payer

Welcome to Code WACK!, your podcast on America's broken healthcare system and Medicare for All could help. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**.

What do Californians really want when it comes to their health care? What will it take to get more labor support for a single-payer Medicare for All system in the state? We recently spoke to **Cindy Young**, a consultant who helps the **Minnesota and California Nurses Associations** with bargaining health and welfare benefits. Cindy's a board member of the **California Alliance for Retired Americans** and serves as vice chair of the **Healthy California Now** coalition. She's been a labor and Medicare for All advocate for more than four decades.

(5-second stinger)

Welcome to Code WACK! Cindy.

Young: It's an honor to be with you all. I love being with advocates and I also love talking about this subject. Thanks for having me today.

Q: Let's talk about labor and single payer in California where, as we know, there's quite a bit happening these days. You are vice chair of Healthy California Now, a statewide coalition of organizations, including labor unions, who support state-based single payer. What's Healthy California Now doing to increase labor support for single payer?

Young: Well, I'm really excited because I have been at this, and I was actually chair of Healthy California long before it was the reiteration that it is right now and we have never had more labor participation than we do right now. So we've got National Union of Healthcare Workers, UNITE HERE, the machinist unions, who are the rocks behind Healthy California Now, and have made significant contributions, financial contributions, to see that we succeed. We now have California Federation of Teachers, IFPTE Local 21, AFSCME 3299, San Francisco Labor Council, Alameda Labor Council, and the two AFSCME statewide councils have this on their agenda for their board meeting this month.

So I think our organizing approach with unions is different now because we are asking them to be partners. We aren't telling them: "Sign on to this bill." "Do this." We're saying, we believe this is the only way we're going to manage to keep a decent health plan is to take it off the bargaining table and, you know, we guarantee health care for every worker by guaranteeing health care for all. And if we can do that, right, then we can ... then we will keep a decent level of coverage. We don't have to spend hours and hours talking about this.

And there's a way to talk about that. And then you make a labor table, right, where representatives can talk about what they're concerned about and talk about ways that they see us advancing and talk about, like, who should the author of the bill be if we have legislation?

How do we organize workers? How do we put together a program to educate our members, which has a different twist than just educating the public, right? So I see this Healthy California Now as being a successful coalition with the labor movement.

Q: Wonderful. What are some of the challenges you're facing now?

Young: The same challenges we've always had, which is: It's hard to bump up against their traditional wisdom, and it takes a lot of time and energy and so it's always around capacity. You know, capacity to do the work. Capacity to find activists. Capacity, you know, to get programs up and running, right? And to get people's attention to advance, right, the vision and goal and that's hard to do without a bazillion dollars.

Q: Hmmm. Right. The California Labor Federation endorsed the state's latest single-payer bill known as CalCare and Assemblyman Ash Kalra, the bill's author, is working on getting even more union support. What do you think it will take?

Young: I don't think the labor movement is actually going to engage in pursuing AB 1400 for all the reasons that I just said. This is a bill that was developed by one union without any other input from the other unions. If you want to get union support, you're going to have to treat people as a partner, right? So you know, you collectively select the author, right? You collectively decide what the language is going to be. I've worked in coalition on legislation. I know how to get stuff passed, and saying "Here's the bill. Will you support it?" is not the way to do it.

And "you can't make an amendment unless, you know, I agree with it." It's like, it doesn't work that way. And particularly, and there's lots of little pieces to get worked out. So you have unions that represent healthcare workers. What happens, right? AB 1400 would prevent a system like Kaiser - and I'm not talking about insurance - existing. There are 8 million Californians that are in Kaiser. If you were to say to them, "Kaiser, as you know it, is no longer going to exist," right? You have to ... you, you know, it won't work. It will not work.

So I think Ash Kalra is a wonderful politician. I think he's done great things. He's passed some great bills. I don't think he's going to get..., I mean, you know, the Labor Federation will support it because one of their biggest allies asked them to do that and of course, they will but to build union support on this bill, I don't think it's going to happen. I think that what we're doing at Healthy California Now is how to build labor support. We want you to come and be a partner. We want to create a table for you to raise your concerns and collectively figure out solutions that work, right, for you. How does this impact your union?

And even the organizing question, right, this table that provides people with a way for them to really get rid of these heavy issues and use a group think, right, to figure out the solutions to the problems. So I think I really appreciate the approach that our board has taken. I think it's brave and I think that it's the only way we're going to get the labor movement to support single payer.

So, um, you know, do I think AB 1400 is good? Yes, but I don't think that they're going to get a lot of labor support.

Q: *Hmm. And how badly is that going to hurt them?*

Young: Well it's hard to get much done in Sacramento without labor support, right? If you don't have, you know, if you don't have those unions weighing in, and particularly, you know, if somebody says, "This is gonna hurt our members," right, in these ways, if you don't have protections for workers, what politician is going to be willing to step out and do that, right?

And the other thing that I think is critical, and a real difference in strategy is that no matter what happens, the governor has to lead. Right? So let's say every politician supported this and the bill got on a governor's desk, right? If the governor doesn't sign it, it is not going to become law. So we have to get the governor to lead and that has been our mantra now for months: "Governor Newsom, lead on single payer. Keep your promise." Right?

And lead on single payer because ultimately, that's who's going to make the final decision on this. He's either gonna say yes, or he's gonna veto and if we don't get him out in front to help us in Washington DC to fix some of the things, the doors that need to be opened to get us to get the money, right, from the federal government that we need to fund single payer in California, the governor or the governor's staff has to do that. So you know I think starting here is important, but there's lots of work that gets done in between that, and so I, you know, appreciate all the work that went into AB 1400 but I think it's going nowhere at all, frankly.

Q: *Hmmm. Wow. Thank you for that. Is there anything else you haven't touched on that you wanted to mention before we sign off?*

Young: You know the only thing I'd like to touch on is a message of hope in that as hard as this issue is to organize around, if you look back at the last 10 years, we have made incredible strides in convincing the public, right? The California Endowment just did these town halls all over the state, you know, focusing on what people want out of a healthcare system.

Q: *That's right, the Endowment and several other foundations held town halls to learn about what low-income Californians want. And surprisingly, 65% of them want government-run healthcare!*

Young: I mean, that's bold, when you say you want a government-run healthcare system, oftentimes people think "Do you want the DMV to be running your health care?" It's like people are getting over some of those [stigmas] that have drug us down. And recognizing that, you know, the industry hasn't spent any money opposing us at this point, I feel like we're in a good position to make more advancements. I'm hopeful about the Healthy California Commission, the governor's Commission. I don't think it's going to be a perfect report, but if that report, right, can lead us in a direction, then we have a door open to do more work and to help us advance our cause down the road, right?

There's lots of things that can be done. We can get Newsom in a second term and continue, right, putting pressure on him to lead on single payer. So I'm hopeful and I hope others will keep doing the great work that they're doing and keep pushing as hard as they can.

They talk about food deserts, it's like we live in healthcare deserts because they're building hospitals and clinics with koi ponds in Monterey. They're not building, you know, clinics and hospitals in poor communities where they are desperately needed and so these are people who see the impacts of those kinds of policy decisions.

And, you know, they're willing to now speak out where, I don't know how vocal their voices were in prior times, right? I think things have gotten pretty bad and folks are more willing to speak up and I mean, we could say "Medicare for All" now and someone doesn't think you're a socialist, right? You know, before people...I mean, I was called a socialist for years. I was like I don't care. Call me whatever you want to. That's irrelevant to me, right but we can say that now and people don't flinch. They actually... it's like it's getting to be more of a common thing. So now, we've done some great work in the last decades, but we've got a ways to go.

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