



Podcast Transcript

Is the Tide Turning for Medicare for All?

Featuring Cindy Young

Dispatcher: 911, what's your emergency?

Caller: America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying! (ambulance siren)

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on our callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host **Brenda Gazzar**. This time on **Code WACK!** In honor of Labor Day, we're asking 'why are unions so split on the issue of Medicare for All?' ***Is Medicare for All dividing organized labor or pushing it towards social justice?*** We spoke to consultant **Cindy Young**, 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**.

(5-second stinger music)

Welcome to Code WACK! Cindy.

(00:47)

Young: Thank you. It's nice to be here today.

(00:50)

Q: ***So no one disputes the importance of health benefits to labor unions, and yet, interestingly, not all unions feel the same way about Medicare for All. So what's an example of these differences of opinion and why is this issue so divisive in the labor movement today?***

(01:07)

Young: It's divisive so, you know, amongst almost every coalition, there are people with different viewpoints and perspectives and inside the house of labor, you have what I would characterize

as more conservative unions who use health care as a bargaining chip, as an organizing tool, right, to get people to join their union. So they can say, 'if you sign up to be with us, you're going to get this fully paid family plan for health insurance' and if someone says that to you you think, man, I'm going to fight for that. I'm going to fight for the union, right? And their concern is that if they don't have that bargaining tool to help them organize that they are not going to be able to recruit members into their union. So there is one perspective, that's one perspective, right? And then there is another perspective, which is my perspective, which is we can win at this we can never win.

(02:06)

Young: We can never win this issue. And if you look at the level of benefits, the level of coverage, right, what's covered, what's not covered. Who can I see? Where do I have to go to keep benefits covered? Right. It continues to be more expensive for me, the worker and fewer choices, narrow networks have become very popular as a cost containment mechanism. If my physician isn't on this panel, surprise bills, right? I think, 'oh, I have an Anthem plan.' I go to an Anthem hospital. I go in to have surgery and all of a sudden I get a huge bill – the anesthesiologist is out of network. Well, I went to an Anthem hospital. Why would I have to ask if anybody was on that network? So from my perspective, right, these things are impairing workers' ability due to cost and access, and that they're going to get worse than what they are now, because this is how insurance companies are making millions of dollars and shedding risk, right?

(03:08)

Young: They're shedding their responsibilities and it's all in that fine print. So workers are getting harmed by our healthcare system. So I think why not just take this off the bargaining table and go for other things. There are so many other things that we could bargain for that families need. So that's my perspective and many other unions feel the same perspective. I think the hardest issue for labor is that this is a heavy, heavy lift. It's a heavy lift with politicians. It's a heavy lift with policy makers and most people in that world are like, 'nah, this is never going to happen.'

Right. But Bernie Sanders made that different. And everybody that worked for Bernie made that different because they actually talked about this, organized around this issue and realized there's a tide turning amongst the American people around their perspective. And unfortunately, you know, when the peons lead, the leaders follow, that's what I think. Right? So we have to keep organizing in our community so that we can push the politicians and the policy makers in the right direction.

(04:14)

Q: Great point. A 2020 Politico article mentioned that in the case of one union, there was a clear split between the union leadership and the rank and file over Medicare for All. Is this common? How does a split like that affect the ability of a union to lead in the political arena?

(04:35)

Young: Well, I mean, so that Politico article was instructive, right? But the fact of the matter is that it didn't change the mind of leadership. It did not. Right. And so those workers have to, then the ones that do right, have to then go out and organize like-minded people and when it gets time for the union leadership to run for office, they find someone to run against them. And that's, you know, unfortunately, speaking the truth, that's how we change people's minds

(05:04)

Q: And on that note, have you ever seen a union that previously opposed single payer Medicare for All switch sides? And if so, tell us about it and how it happened.

(05:16)

Young: Have I ever seen a union switch sides? Yeah, I would think now more often. So I'm speaking in generalities, the building trades' unions are oftentimes seen as a more conservative component of the AFL-CIO and even within the building trades, right? The painters, the laborers, right. There's even progressive and conservative unions inside of that, I am seeing more progression, more progressive values coming out of the building trades than I ever have before and I see some willingness, right, on their part to step out of their comfort zone because they are beginning to see that they can't organize because the amount an employer has to put into a trust fund to fund benefits is making it impossible to organize workers into their union because an employer is not going to pay \$15 bucks an hour for health insurance, right? So it's like slowly, right, once you present the data and you walk them through this, they're beginning to see that. So I'm seeing a shift in that perspective and I'm very happy to see that.

(06:30)

Q: Wow. That's great. In February, 2020, when the Democrats were in the fight of a lifetime to stop Trump's re-election, Politico suggested that Medicare for All was fracturing organized labor, especially in union-heavy states like California, New York and Michigan. What are your thoughts on that, Cindy?

(06:48)

Young: I think we're getting louder and it's uncomfortable for the conventional wisdom and you know, I've got on my Bernie shirt today, right? If you look at the amount of people... I went to Bernie's rally in Richmond, right, when he came to California There were thousands of people who support his vision and when you would go to an opponent right of his rally, you would see, you know, a bunch of traditional leaders, right? And so I don't think it's fracturing. Bernie cut a deal right at the end with Biden, and he got to be chair of the Senate Finance Committee, one of the most powerful committees in our country. I thought that was brilliant.

And now if you read the paper you see that the progressive caucuses, which is now up to 100 members under (Rep.) Pramila Jayapal's leadership, are saying we demand, right, dental vision, and hearing aids be included in Medicare. It's like that's advancement. It's not fracturing us. It's pushing us to do things in the right direction and I actually think it's divisive to say, it's splitting you up. Instead of saying, you know, you have people who believe that this is a right, pushing in the right direction, they characterize this as, you know, fracturing the labor movement and it's like, we're not fracturing it. We're pushing it towards social justice just like it should be. What's wrong with that? There's something about solidarity, you know?

(08:18)

Q: Hmmm. Great point. Thank you so much, Cindy, for being here today.

(08:22)

Young: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having me.

(5-minute stinger music)

(08:30)

Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at heal-ca.org.

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