



## Labor's brutal tradeoff - health care or pensions?

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*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 America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar**.

(music)

This time on Code WACK! Who's the powerhouse behind the Orange County Democratic Party in California? Why is she raising her voice in support of Medicare for All as a union leader representing more than 30,000 hotel workers in Southern California and Arizona? **Ada Briceño**, co-president of **UNITE HERE Local 11**, has dedicated her career to uplifting marginalized voices and bridging communities. Besides years of union organizing and political work, she has led many civil rights, immigrant rights, women's rights and environmental efforts. She is a Democratic National Committee member and was named one of Orange County's 100 Most Influential by the Orange County Register four times since 2014.

**Welcome to Code WACK! Ada.**

**Briceño:** Thank you for having me.

***Q: We're so excited to have you. You've led an incredible life. Tell us how you came to live in the United States.***

**Briceño:** Well, I had lived under a dictator for some time, and then we had a civil war in my country of Nicaragua and I arrived to the United States on February 14th of 1980 at the age of six years old. So I knew what it was like to be prevented from singing revolutionary songs, and I knew how my voice was silenced. So I'm grateful to be in the United States where I can use my voice, and that's kind of been the theme of my career and my life.

***Q: I love that. You're also the chair of the Orange County Democratic Party and we're key to flipping 20 local seats and two state Senate seats from red to blue in 2020. The following year, the first Democratic Board of Supervisor was elected in traditionally conservative Orange County for the first time in 127 years. Tell us about those wins. What were the keys to your success?***

**Briceño:** Well, look, we've been very fortunate. I'm just so thankful to be part of this change, making change here in Orange County. We've been turning the structures around here, and so after we won that Supervisorial seat in this last election cycle, we took 22 seats and we won the board of supervisors in addition to a state senate seat and a few more. It is because the demographics are changing. I think Trump was very helpful in Orange County to activate women, women in suburban areas, and we've just kept a very strong activism happening on the ground. So knocking on doors and speaking to voters and telling them about how to vote their interests. So it's been really exciting. We're recruiting more folks, more people of color, more women, and yeah, and we've been widening our table.

***Q: Right. So how did you get involved in the labor movement?***

**Briceño:** Look, I really went as a young person trying to help out my family because, you know, we were working poor. My father worked and made not very much money to sustain a family of five or six with him, and I had to go into the workforce very early so I worked odd-end jobs, and somehow I just got lucky. I got a union job. I was a front desk clerk, and I didn't know it was a union job. All I knew is I got my best meal of the day, I was making a couple of dollars more an hour, and I got my first pair of glasses and it really transformed my life. And those things didn't transform my life, but having a voice on the job was what was key to me, knowing that I can stand up for myself and I can advocate because I had the tools and then I learned how to stand up for my coworkers, the cooks and dishwashers that I worked alongside with. But it didn't end there. I then was able to train them and

help them after I understood how to do it, how to stand up for themselves and how to demand respect for themselves. So in a very short period of time, I became the leader of the workers in the hotel and the union sought me out and here I am, 32 years later.

**Q: Amazing. I'm curious, what city was that in?**

**Briceño:** In San Pedro.

**Q: Got it. How did you come to care about healthcare? Did you or someone you know, have a healthcare related experience that led you to this?**

**Briceño:** Well, look, I got to be truthful with you. I just came to terms with dealing with this – that, you know, I've been around in the labor movement for 32 years. I've held a whole bunch of positions, but there was like 15 years that I was constantly negotiating, you know, on the other side of management and the bulk of those years, maybe even 20, that I spent negotiating for more money for the big companies that provide health care for our members and so instead of building worker power, you know, I had to be, cuz that's why I got into it, I told you my voice was very important, right, and, you know, having people stand up and demand respect is crucial. But instead of building more power, my job was to get money to sustain the benefits that people were receiving. And frankly, my members shouldn't have paid for that.

It should have been these corporations, right? These large medical corporations that have taken every single penny we had. And so it's been very infuriating, right, to see how our members gave up additional pay, how they gave up, you know, negotiating for things like childcare that would've drastically changed their lives, pension benefits. And so, you know, I was fortunate that we have fought really hard for the benefits we have at the union, right? So we've protected those, but really in a big way at a detriment to our quality of life and what we are able to bring into the family and how we're able to support and keep a roof over people's heads.

**Q: Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, right. You're on the steering committee of the labor campaign for single payer. Tell us about the labor campaign and how you got involved.**

**Briceño:** So, look, our country was going through a difficult dialogue, right? And that was over, you know, who was going to be our nominee. And, you know, at that point I was supporting Bernie Sanders because of this really strong stance on Medicare for All. And my extreme anger out of the fact that, you know, so much

goes into keeping your job just to keep your health care, right. So, you know, our union local 11 in Los Angeles, Southern California, most of Southern California and Arizona needed to stand up and speak about why having Medicare for All as related to the candidate that we were backing up, you know, was so crucial. And, you know, that's where I've met up with the folks and I started getting more involved in the steering committee in the National Steering Committee. So I did a few press conferences with them, and then I was recruited to go into the National Steering Committee.

***Q: Wow, and how has that been for you to be a part of that?***

**Briceño:** Well, actually, it's really rewarding to see that others in the labor movement stand up for Medicare for All, and that I'm not alone and many times it felt that very few labor leaders were lined up for Medicare for All, you know, and so it's been a good experience to allow me to even raise my voice louder on why we need Medicare for All or single payer.

***Q: Wonderful. You're co-president of Unite Here Local 11, which represents more than 30,000 hotel workers in Southern California and Arizona. Can you tell us about the workers you represent and how they're being affected by our healthcare system?***

**Briceño:** So we represent cooks and dishwashers. You know, we have predominantly women, women of color who work in our industry, low-waged folks, right? So our job is to make sure that we raise the standards, but so much is, I mean, I know people who have not gotten divorced for years so they can keep health care. I know people who have gotten married because they need health care. I know cooks, you know, that would love to open their new and own innovative business, but they are stuck to their employer and their health care because it would cost them, I don't know, thousands of dollars to get their own health care. So I've watched and seen how people are stuck and equally important is to see the folks that are not unionized and how the employer uses health care as fear, right, to hold people back, to not have a voice on the job.

And frankly, it affects our members because instead of me focusing and our, and them focusing on fighting for other benefits, they're stuck fighting to keep the benefits that they receive now. So we've got a bigger vision. We don't want to have to fight for something that should come normally to every American, right? We want to fight for other things and folks work until they're 70, 80 years old, they cannot retire. It's not the American way. It should not be this way. Right? And so we want to eliminate that from the bargaining table. We want to level the playing field,

and we wanna focus on building more and fighting for more and having a broader and bigger vision of what we should be like.

**Q: Mm-Hmm, can you give us an example of how health care is used by employers as leverage?**

**Briceño:** People are fearful, so everybody risks something, right? But when you're risking your health and welfare benefit, your hospital, then people think about it more, right? And then also like, we should be, instead of focusing on bargaining, we should be focused on getting other people to be in the union because the labor movement's growth is tied to democracy. We've seen the decline of democracy by seeing the decline of the labor movement. So we spend a vast amount of time at the bargaining table, and we've got to take that away from them. I know I'm mixing here, union and non-union, but bear with me.

**Q: Right. You mentioned that in order to get health care, some people get married or they don't start the business that they want, what other kinds of decisions do they have to make to get health care and how does that take a toll on them?**

**Briceño:** If they don't have proper pension benefits, they have to work until they're ... older, and therefore their mental health and their physical bodies. I mean, we represent folks that scrub 16 toilets a day and make up 32 beds a day. The wear and tear of their bodies is extreme. It's difficult. So can you imagine, you know, a 60, a 65-year-old, a 70-year-old, which we have many of who are still having to do that because they don't have proper benefits for pensions because it all went to their health care?

***Thank you Ada Briceño. Stay tuned next time as we continue our discussion with Ada Briceno about how union workers would benefit from Medicare for All.***

***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](http://heal-ca.org).***

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