



Making the case for single payer: When you've got yours, why fight for everyone else?

"I have a vision that if we have single payer, then that's one less thing that we have to worry about fighting for." - Ada Briceño.

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!** What would unions have to gain under Medicare for All – and why are they still divided on the issue today? What would it take for labor to speak with a unified voice on this issue? To find out, we spoke to **Ada Briceño**, co-president of UNITE HERE Local 11, which represents more than 30,000 hotel workers in Southern California and in Arizona. She is also a **Democratic National Committee** member, chair of the **Orange County Democratic Party** and was named one of Orange County's 100 Most Influential by the Orange County Register four times since 2014.

Welcome back to **Code WACK!** Ada.

Q: What do workers and unions have to gain under a single-payer system? And do you have a story that illustrates this point?

Briceño: I don't know if I have a story, but I have a vision that if we have single payer, then that's one less thing that we have to worry about fighting for. Right? And everybody has the same, and everybody has good benefits and you don't have to worry about where it's going. You don't have to worry about whether or not you can retire or move or, you know, whatever it is, because your health (benefits) and welfare will go with you. Well, I do have a story, Kristine, who I grew up with, she is in her seventies, maybe a little bit older, maybe, you know, close to her eighties. I grew up with her. In fact, she looks at me as her daughter and she worked up until maybe right before the pandemic. She was tired. I can tell she was tired, but she was so worried about number one, making ends meet.

But number two, having health care. So she worked and worked and worked until finally her employer was like, you've got to go. You, we don't have work for you anymore cuz you're too slow, in other words. Right. I mean, you know, she was debilitating quickly. Our members become a family because we, you know, we fight together, we struggle against the boss, multimillion-dollar corporations for those same benefits that we're talking about and for, you know, for other respect on the job. And, you know, you get to love each other. And so it was very hard for me to see Kristine for a long period of time really deteriorate with a very difficult job and have to get up every single day at five o'clock in the morning to get there so she can preserve what she has and she can make sure she was taking care of her health.

Q: Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Wow. And what did she do for a living?

Briceño: What she did was within one of the hotels, she was a cashier there.

Q: Got it. And how is she doing today?

Briceño: She's doing okay. Yeah. She's fine.

Q: Many workers of every age, insured or not, report difficulty paying for various aspects of the health care they need. We know that Medicare for All would eliminate that problem. So where do most labor unions stand today on the issue of single payer and why is that?

Briceño: Well, there are many of my colleagues that are standing strong with Medicare for All, and there are others that are not. And I think that, you know, some of the reasons why they're not is because we spend our lives fighting for those prized benefits. And when you sacrifice so much for them, it is really tough

to see an alternative and there's a sense of pride. Nobody else has these kinds of benefits like we do, and therefore we've got to protect them. We protect them for our members from the boss and from the insurance companies and from everything and we put all our weight into them. And so I think for some folks it's scary to think about the alternative.

Q: Wow, that's so interesting. And what would you say to those folks who have a hard time picturing the future under Medicare for All?

Briceño: That we can dream of a different movement where more people are unionized, where we can have more power to stand up for the things that we believe in, that it doesn't have to be this way. That it doesn't have to be like pulling teeth. That there are other countries in the world that, you know, are, we're a huge leader in the world and we should be in the forefront of this. So I would say to them that, you know, while it might be scary to change, I think it's scarier to stay the same.

Q: Right. I know this might be a very hard thing to answer, but would you say that most unions are still kind of hesitant with Medicare for all? Or is it like 50/50? Or, or how would you characterize it?

Briceño: Most are not there and I would say that it's not an easy thing, you know, to be there because labor's in the fight of their lives just to keep our existence, you know? And so we are often preoccupied, but because we are in the fight of our lives and because it is so tough, we've got to think outside the box and we've got to take big risks and we've got to be bold in so many ways if we're going to change the tide. Right? And this is one thing that would take the burden off of us to be able to do many great things. And on top of everything else that will do for the American people, Uhhuh,

Q: Uhhuh, <affirmative>. Right? So what's being done to address the concerns that unions have?

Briceño: I don't know if enough has been done. I don't know if we as a movement have reached out in a dramatic way, but I just think that having labor understand that they would have a seat at the table in making that, and in being part of making that change and transition into a bigger and better system that works for everyone. You know, we do believe in solidarity as a labor movement. It's not a foreign concept to us. So I just think that we need to feel as a labor movement

that we are going to be in control and that we're going to have a voice in what's created and how it's created.

Q: And do you think that would happen if labor is at the table? That they would have a voice? That they will be heard?

Briceño: I don't think I have envisioned it a thousand percent, like through all the motions. But I do believe that, you know, the folks that care about it, and if we were to establish it to know that we've got to fight just like everything else to have a prominent seat at that table.

Q: You mentioned that unions have fought so hard to get the benefits that they currently have and that change is hard. Are there any other concerns that you are aware of that they may have regarding Medicare for All.

Briceño: What kind of benefits will they be? Will they be on par with what has been fought for and won, how much control people will have over it? You know, for example, my union is a culmination of a few trust funds and where we paid double the administrative fee, double or triple the attorney fees. And so we see that benefit, right? But it's also about control on the other side. I don't like to double pay for anything, right? And so as a result, we merged many of our trust funds so we can consolidate because we think that there is a big benefit in buying power. The more people that are involved, the better price you'll get. But I think there's a fear, like what happens if the service doesn't go well. Right now, many of these trust funds have, you're the chair of the trust, which I was for a long time for some of the trust.

You got a lot of power. Like you, you know, are able to make a phone call and your member will be taken care of. It's very small things, you know, but very significant things for some folks, right? But I just want a system that will bring everyone in because, you know, it just can't be one group, even though we fought for it doing well in health care, we've got to have preventative care, we've got to be able to take care of ourselves as a nation. And so it goes beyond what I feel as a labor leader. It goes to take care of, you know, everyone in our nation.

Q: Great point. How can we create a more constructive dialogue on these issues with unions?

Briceño: I think it's listening, asking folks, I don't have those issues, as I said, but sitting down with those folks that have those concerns and trying to put as advocates, as fighters for Medicare for All, putting ourselves in the shoes of each and every single one of their unions that has left their sweat and tears for those benefits that have happened. So what does it look like? How does it move

forward? With keeping people's thoughts in mind, you know, with bringing solidarity, with having that dialogue and going back and forth. A lot of it is communications, you know, I think.

Q: Right, right. And how do you think we could be better at that in the movement? How can we be better at building bridges with the unions and listening and doing exactly what you're talking about? What needs to happen to make that happen?

Briceño: We're already starting to do that. So for example, lifting the voices of folks that, are there, you know, and figuring out how did they get there, what in essence happened? Lifting those stories where, you know, the generations that are coming in might be more open-minded to a different system than what, you know, someone like me that has been in there for 32 years might resist. Because sometimes we just think, 'Hey, things are that same way. We've just got to protect what's there.' My job is to protect what's happened before me, you know? But being able to talk to people and give them anecdotes and show them how, how things work, and then listen to them also. But I think those are kind of the things that I implement in my organizing, finding those commonalities and figuring out how to be helpful with those and then moving on the issues that are important to me as well.

Q: Beautiful. What would it take, or what will it take for labor to speak and act with a unified voice on this issue?

Briceño: Well, I think while we're small, we're mighty. Right? And I think that the Medicare for All movement needs everybody to line up to make sure that we're able to get that momentum to pass it. And so whether it's the women's movement or the labor movement, other movements, I think it's crucial for folks to come in in a meaningful way and I also think that others might think that if the labor movement resists that, is that something that we should be looking at? Right? So that's just my perception, my feel(ing). So if I'm an elected official, I'm going to be asking, what does labor think about this? And if I want an out, I'm going to say, well, they're not all united. I'm going to stay away from this. You know you could cut it and dice it in different ways.

Q: Right. That's a really good point. How can we get more underrepresented voices, including immigrants and people of color in the single-payer movement?

Briceño: I mean, it's I think the same as in organizing, whether you're trying to organize someone to participate in their contract or to stand up for women's rights or to want and be a voice for immigration rights. Right? It's like one

conversation at a time. You know, I've dedicated my life to bringing people together and to speak with one voice, and there's really no shortcuts. It's really, in my opinion, it is inspiring someone to see that vision, to know that there's others around them that feel the same way and that their voice is needed in this particular area. So it is an organizing task that whenever I talk to people, I just remind them like, 'look, nobody's going to talk to those folks that you're talking to about Medicare for All.' Like, you've got to ignite that passion in them. They should be able to see another world that we could create and that their voice matters in order for us to get there. Right? So not an easy task, but an important one.

Q: Yes. What would women gain from having a single-payer healthcare system in California and in America?

Briceño: I think in America, one of the things that we've seen with abortion rights has been that even though abortion was legal, Jesus, I hate to say that, right, for such a long period of time, it was having access in some areas of our country that, you know, not everybody had access and, you know, who didn't have access, you know, people of color did not have access.

So having Medicare for All, I think would expand it and would not neutralize it, but standardize that benefit. I think having information as well, and also having, you know, just everything else that goes along with just reproductive health. Having reproductive justice by having, you know, making sure that we had spaces available for everyone that needed (it) and that they didn't have to travel, for example, or, or go five towns down from where they live. So that access is crucial and under Medicare for all, you know, I envision a system that would be standardized in every part of the nation or somewhat, you know.

Q: Right. Including abortion?

Briceño: Yes, yes. Yeah. And reproductive health in general, you know, so birth control, you know, having access is crucial and having it be available to folks is crucial everywhere and everyone.

Q: Ada, do you think that the overturning of Roe vs. Wade can be tapped by the single-payer movement as a way to invigorate the movement?

Briceño: Yes. I believe that reproductive rights is health care, right? And reproductive health is health care and it's one of the same and so how do we get in there closer to have people envision that? Because if you are a leader that believes in abortion rights and reproductive health, then you're very close to understanding that we need, in my opinion, Medicare for All. So, yeah. I do, I do.

And I think it's a pivotal moment for us to be thinking about how to integrate the two messages.

Thank you Ada Briceño.

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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