

Stolen Health Coverage Reinstated . . . for Now

by Katherine Notley

Effectively stolen health-care coverage for Medicaid enrollees in Mississippi and public sector workers in Kentucky has been reinstated—but only for now. In Mississippi, some 50,000 enrollees in the state Medicaid program for Poverty Level and Disabled (PLAD) have won their fight against Gov. Haley Barbour (R) not to be moved over to the Federal Medicare program, where their premiums and co-payments would have been prohibitively higher, and coverage for medications hopelessly inadequate. However, what they won essentially constitutes a “stay of execution,” until the end of January.

Similarly in Kentucky, Republican Gov. Ernie Fletcher tried, like Barbour, to cut the budget by deadly strikes at the most vulnerable. He re-wrote insurance coverage for state workers, raising premiums and co-pays so high, as to put even routine preventive care out of reach of the large number of state workers whose pay is already not a living wage.

On Oct. 20, *EIR* spoke to Kentucky State Rep. Perry Clark (D) and Mississippi State Rep. Credell Calhoun (D), both of whom were leaders in their respective fights, and both of whom stressed the importance, beyond time-buying measures locally, of defeating George Bush on Nov. 2. Not the least, they pointed out, both Republican governors had to concede the fight or risk losing their states for Bush (Barbour is the former Republican National Committee chairman).

In the Mississippi case, the defeat of Bush is also immediately relevant to saving the PLAD enrollees’ coverage. “If we beat Bush, it’s taken care of,” Calhoun explained. “It’s stemming around the Federal Medicaid cuts, that’re coming in Dec. 31, 2005. With Bush gone, that’s going to change. You know, Kerry’s already said what he’s going to do. So, that’s all out the window, and everybody’ll be back to square one, and try to get their programs together.”

The fight over the cuts began when Barbour tried to cut \$100 million from the state budget by transferring PLAD enrollees from State Medicaid to Medicare, which is wholly funded by the Federal government. In Barbour’s fiscal conservative Newspeak, this “Medicaid reform” was supposed to go into effect on July 1. Calhoun said, “State Sen. David Jordan got 10,000 signatures to halt that, and took it to the Attorney General [Democrat David Hood]. The Attorney General saw that these people were in serious difficulty, so he brought suit.”

The cut-off date was moved back to Oct. 1, and a Federal court consent decree Oct. 15 froze the status quo, until a hearing can be held on Feb. 3, 2005, while the governor is insisting that the legislature will have to take it up when it convenes in January. In the meantime, Barbour is pledging to hold the budget line by stopping Medicaid fraud!

People Stood Up and Said ‘No!’

As in Mississippi, explained Kentucky’s Perry Clark, Fletcher’s cuts were rolled back to the *status quo ante*, but by the legislature. “The bill actually just went in with the insurance companies, and we actually put down, what an insurance policy is going to be, what it’s going to cover, what its co-pays are going to be, what its limits are on out-of-pocket expenses. The problem with that is, we never really fixed the root of the problems; we’ll have to be back within one year, dealing with the health insurance crisis again.

“What we did do, within the bill, though, was establish a user group—all the groups that are involved and all the different state employee groups and organizations that get the health insurance plan . . . put them on a swift timetable to help come up with some answers, within a very short period of time. Because, a year’ll pass very swiftly, and we’ll be back in the same boat. We really haven’t fixed anything.”

The bill passed both houses unanimously. But, Clark emphasized, “You know, the health bill’s important, because that was a terrible plan. And it’s like the flu shot vaccination: when they’re not available, people are going to die. This health insurance program, people especially on the low end—your bus drivers, your cafeteria workers—people on the low end of the income in state employees jobs, actually couldn’t have afforded health care at all. I mean, you would have actually harmed people, probably killed people, because they wouldn’t get diagnosis or preventive medicine they need, because they would have the money or the wherewithal to foot the out-of-pocket expenses. So, it was a terrible, terrible plan.

“But the real story is, that the people made the difference. The real story is, is they stood up and said, ‘No!’ *en masse*. The educators, the schoolbus drivers, the cafeteria workers, they all stood together in harmony and unity, and said, ‘No!’ And the public, they rejected the plan. And while I do understand that we’re dealing with state employees, we’ve ultimately got to deal with insurance for *everybody*, because it’s just as bad in the regular market as what we deal with in the state. But, they stood up, and they said, ‘No!’ because you had a terrible, terrible measure that was going to harm people, and the people stood up, and that’s the real story.”

When *EIR* described the Mississippi situation, Clark paused a moment, then said, “Wow. But, everybody has this spiralling cost of health insurance; it’s an ‘equal opportunity crisis’ across the United States.”