

D.C. Hospital Mobilization Wins Congressional Briefing

by Paul Gallagher

A unique Congressional briefing on the principle of the General Welfare of the nation, was the latest fruit of the battle to save D.C. General Hospital in the nation's capital. The briefing in the Rayburn House Office Building March 22 was convened by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), and moderated by Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad, a leader of the "Save D.C. General" forces. It was highlighted by passionate addresses from leaders of the mobilization to an overflow crowd of 300, and was marked by Conyers's repeated statements that the problem of collapsing public health standards could only be tackled "on a national level."

The words echoed Lyndon LaRouche's identification of the planned D.C. General Hospital shutdown as "an issue of national and international significance," when, in early January, LaRouche's movement threw itself into the fight against the closing. Since then, the mobilization has undone "a done deal" to privatize and close the capital's only public hospital; and it has gotten some of the forces behind the shutdown to retreat, and start sniping at the others.

"The spirit is quite different here tonight," Dr. Muhammad told a mass meeting the night before the briefing. LaRouche leader Lynne Speed noted one major sign of the change the mobilization has wrought: a March 17 *Washington Post* six-point editorial criticizing the hospital shutdown plan—a plan in which *Post* owner Katharine Graham's powerful family interests had been involved from the beginning! (See *EIR*, March 23, 2001.) "This is our doing," said Mrs. Speed.

Constitutional Principle

What has been occurring over the Winter months, is a growing political mass strike over the Washington hospital, spreading out through the LaRouche movement's work to include state and local elected officials and activists from

all over the eastern United States. Representative Conyers welcomed the phenomenon, in thanking state Representatives Erik Fleming of Mississippi and Harold James of Pennsylvania for "taking a national perspective," acting to stop public health collapse in their own states by highlighting a fight to save an excellent public hospital in the nation's capital. The briefing was told that 1,500 hospitals have closed in the United States since 1990. The state of public health in most nations, globally, has been worsening far more quickly. The U.S. Constitution's Preamble identifies "to promote the General Welfare," as the crucial principle for both the Federal government's powers of economic regulation, to reverse such a collapse, and for the individual citizen's responsibilities to the nation and the world.

"The hearts of individuals vibrate not merely for themselves, their families, and their friends, but for posterity, *for a people*, until their country becomes the world"—thus the great poet Percy Shelley characterized such a revolutionary moment. "We have mobilized and educated the population," Dr. Muhammad said during Lyndon LaRouche's webcast, the day before the Congressional briefing. "And we've seen a sea-change in the population of the District of Columbia. The issue of D.C. General has become a topic of conversation at the dinner table, and ordinary people are becoming conversant in the issues."

The lineup of speakers at the March 22 briefing, "National Public Health in Crisis: D.C. General Hospital in Focus," shows the breadth of radiation of this fight already. They ranged from state legislators across the nation, to District of Columbia nurses; from President Clinton's former Special Health Counselor, Dr. Henry Foster, to a leader of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union from New York State; from Congressional aides, to representatives of the American Public Health Association.



Citizens and employees hold a demonstration to save D.C. General Hospital, on March 22 outside the office of Washington Mayor Anthony Williams.

The large briefing room was full to overflowing, and chairs were set up in the hallways around it.

‘Crisis Worse Than FDR Faced’

LaRouche’s spokeswoman, Dr. Debra Freeman, cited LaRouche’s statement in his webcast the previous day, that the first 60 days of the Bush Administration had pushed the world into a crisis worse than that faced by FDR; that the closing of such essential facilities as D.C. General comes in the midst of industrial collapse, the worldwide spread of new diseases, and increases in the ranks of poor people without decent medical care. LaRouche had called the D.C. General issue “an international battle to save the principle of the general welfare in health care, for all nations of the world.”

Pennsylvania legislator Harold James, whose own district has lost 3,000 hospital beds, detailed the critical situation in Philadelphia and in Washington. “Mr. Chairman,” said James, “I believe that the collapse of public health care has proceeded so far in this nation, including in my region of Pennsylvania, that a victory in the battle to save D.C. General is necessary as a national victory, to turn around that national collapse before more lives are lost.” State Representative Fleming cited the recent shutdowns of three charity hospitals in Jackson, Mississippi alone, to urge the same idea.

Lynne Fagnani, of the National Association of Public Hospitals, said that a closing of D.C. General, the highest-rated hospital in Washington, would have a shock-effect on all the hospitals in the region, and this was echoed by leaders of doctors, nurses, medical technicians, and administrators from the Washington area. In fact, the grudging but growing

media coverage of this mobilization, throughout the Washington area, has exposed the fact that the trauma unit of another major hospital, Washington Hospital Center, might be overwhelmed and close down, in just the beginning of a “domino effect” from a D.C. General shutdown.

Dr. Michal Young, of D.C. General’s Medical-Dental staff, who has become a popular spokesman for the embattled staff in recent months, accused the D.C. Financial Control Board (set up by Congressional Republicans in 1995 to run the city’s finances) of deliberately dismantling public health. The mandate of the hospitals and their managers, Dr. Young said, is the general welfare, to provide care for all. In fact, the corrupt motives of the new contract, by which D.C. General is to be privatized and then largely closed, has become a hot issue which is now burning the fingers of the Control Board, Mayor

Anthony Williams, and D.C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (none of whom was willing to appear at the briefing). Representative Conyers’s aide Edith Rassa testified that the Arizona-based takeover company was actually to be paid twice as much in the next year to close the hospital down, as the Control Board was willing to give the hospital to operate. Budget savings are not the issue, she said, but privatization, putting profit over public service.

Not Won Yet

Immediately following the breakthrough of the March 22 briefing, leaders of the mobilization planned to escalate both their outreach and their distribution of broadsheets which feature LaRouche’s forecast of the current economic crash. Candlelight vigils have begun at churches, not only in Washington, but in Virginia and Maryland suburbs; on March 24, a large vigil was planned to start outside D.C. General Hospital itself. As of March 23, the Financial Control Board had been compelled to announce a significant delay in signing the “termination contract” which has been hanging over the hospital since January. The financial dealings of the takeover company (see *EIR*, March 23, 2001) are now being probed. LaRouche, in discussion with Dr. Muhammad at the webcast, had characterized the battle: “When you attack [*Post* owner] Katharine Graham, you’re not doing an injustice, because she is responsible, in a key way, for the power structure which is running this. . . . She is also the leading figure of an army. Now, you don’t eliminate an army by attacking its general; you have to defeat the army. . . . You have to destroy its cohesion.” The mobilization to “Save D.C. General” is embarked on the next steps to do just that.