**The Obamacare Debate**

Beginning in early October 2013, most of the major provisions of the healthcare law called the Affordable Care Act (popularly known as “Obamacare”) began to take effect. This law, which was passed by Congress in December 2009, still arouses a great deal of controversy, and has been the target of ongoing opposition from Republicans in Congress. In fact, the implementation of Obamacare was one of the reasons Republicans gave for shutting down the government for over two weeks in October. The law also has progressive critics.  While Republicans think the law goes too far, some progressives believe it doesn’t go far enough to reform the US healthcare system.

The ACA attempts to address some widely acknowledged problems with the US healthcare system. These include:

* The US spends far more on healthcare than any other country in the world, yet leaves a high percentage of people uninsured.
* The US's health outcomes (including how long we live, infant mortality, and disease rates) are among the worst in the industrialized world.
* The system itself is extremely complex, a patchwork of private insurance and public insurance (like Medicare, for the elderly and disabled, and Medicaid, for the poor) – and the complexity contributes to its high cost.
* The US, unlike many other industrialized countries, still relies mostly on employers to provide private health insurance, rather than relying on government to insure everyone. However, increasingly employers don't provide insurance (or force workers to pay more than they can afford for it), leaving workers in the lurch.

For these and other reasons, a majority of Americans have long supported major reform of our healthcare system. For years before Obamacare was passed, thousands of people across the country organized actions, protests, petition drives, and letter-writing campaigns, and campaigned for candidates in support of healthcare reform.

President Obama was elected in 2008 on the promise of achieving reform. However, any kind of healthcare reform poses huge political challenges. Many Republicans and other conservatives are opposed to expanding government’s role in providing health insurance. Some even argue that existing public healthcare systems, such as Medicare, should be privatized (that is, turned over to private corporations to run). Conservatives argue that the US healthcare system would be improved if there was more private competition for people’s healthcare dollars. And most conservatives are also ideologically opposed to what they call “big government.”

Another major challenge healthcare reformers face is that several very politically powerful industries have a huge stake in the system —in particular, private health insurance companies, as well as pharmaceutical companies. The ACA was a compromise that included these players:  In exchange for restrictions on their practices, the insurance industry accepted a deal in which the federal government would require most individuals and many employers to buy health insurance from them, often with government subsidies. Insurance companies expect that this will result in a massive influx of new customers. The gain for those who wanted reforms: Expanded access to healthcare for millions of Americans, and restrictions on such insurance industry practices as denying coverage to people with “preexisting conditions.”

Many progressive critics of the legislation say that it does not address the fundamental problem with our healthcare system. These critics note that while ACA will provide much needed coverage to more Americans, it will not lead to high-quality, affordable healthcare for all. In fact, they maintain, it props up the existing system by bolstering the role of private health insurance companies.  To solve the healthcare crisis, they believe the US should, like many other industrialized countries, adopt a form of “national health insurance.” Under such a “single payer” plan, a public program such as Medicare would be expanded to cover all Americans, reducing or eliminating the role of the private insurance industry. Advocates argue that only under such a system will the US be able to ensure and afford high-quality healthcare for everyone.  They point to countries around the world that have single-payer systems, which cost about half as much as the US system and have superior health outcomes.