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VIEWPOINT: Labor unions historically blazed the path for health care in U.S.

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Some of the angry protesters at this summer’s town meetings on health care reform expressed the idea that government should not intrude into their health insurance policies. This included workers fearing that the benefits they fought so hard to achieve may be taken away or diluted.

But government is not the enemy, and the unions of many of these workers in fact played an important role in advancing government health insurance.

Republicans have been fanning the flames of fear, but they are operating from a far different standpoint than people who have gotten their health care as the result of a union contract or national legislation. They say individuals can protect themselves by making their choices alone, in the “free market.” This is a fantasy.

The people with the most protection from catastrophic illness are covered by Medicare, Medicaid or the Veterans Administration. These are government programs, and they work.

Other people with good coverage are often the beneficiaries of workplace insurance programs won by unions. As Labor Day nears, it is especially appropriate to point out that most employee health insurance programs came about, directly or indirectly, because people in unions fought hard for them. That’s in part how we got Social Security. And that’s how workplace health insurance expanded as unions got stronger in the 1940s.

President Harry Truman wanted a national health insurance policy in 1948, and unions backed that plan and played the key role in getting him elected. The United Auto Workers, the United Mine Workers, the International Association of Machinists, the International Longshore and Warehouse union and many others kept pressing for national health insurance, but Republicans and the insurance companies blocked it.

So, the unions fought harder for workplace-based health insurance jointly funded by workers and employers as their next best alternative. Unions kept on fighting for better health insurance programs and those programs continued expanding into the 1960s. This was part of the Democratic Party’s Great Society and Medicare and Medicaid under Lyndon B. Johnson.

To the extent that we have health insurance, a lot of it is due to the push by unions. At that time, federal support for the right to organize unions and for fair and binding collective bargaining made union advances possible. A great deal of the health care security that has been achieved in America has been founded on a partnership between union-empowered citizens and the federal government.

We need more government access to health care, not less. And we also need unions. They helped to create both government- and company-based health insurance programs and to elect the kind of Congress people who will support the needs of ordinary people. They could do it again, although unions have been drastically weakened by decades of deindustrialization and union busting.

The health programs and the unions we still have are jeopardized by policies Republicans favor, based on profiteering principles. They would abandon all of us to the merciless “free market.”

To see what kind of health care you would get in a Republican paradise, go back to the days when miners and other workers in dangerous industries suffered death and misery, with no health insurance and no one to help them.

Richard Trumka, former United Mine Workers president and incoming president of the AFL-CIO, explained the current legislative debate. “You can have a bill that guarantees quality, affordable health care for every American, or you can have a bill the Republicans will vote for. But you can’t have both.”

After the Labor Day holiday, let’s hope Congress moves in the right direction. We need health care reform with a public option, to rein in the soaring costs of private insurance and drug companies.

And we need labor law reform, so that workers aren’t threatened and fired for exercising their constitutional right to join a union.
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