

Bob Cook's Account of Trip to DC – June 24, 2009

Early on the morning of June 24th, a bus load of people from VOICE, NOAH and PUSH left the Transit Road Park & Ride on their way to Washington DC. I was one of them. We were on a mission. We crossed over to Batavia on the 90 and got off there to pick up reinforcements, then continued south through the Alleghenies. Our quest would bring us to the doors of power in a struggle to bring health care to all our citizens.

With sleep still blurring our eyes, we tried to make sense of the materials we received as we boarded the bus. Our host, the Gamaliel Foundation, had put together a prep packet to help us get ready. Each packet included info on the health care option we hoped would be included in any legislation to be passed. Dry stuff, but to the point. My thoughts as I read it over told me the point of inclusive health care is almost always lost in the arguments over how it will be paid for.

As the sun crested the low hills surrounding us, we approached and crossed into Pennsylvania. We soon came to our first rest stop, a visitor's center overlooking a fog filled valley. We refreshed ourselves and took in the quiet panorama from the wide patio behind the center, then reboarded to continue our journey. A quick head count somehow confirmed all were aboard. Several miles down the road, a role call confirmed we had left someone behind.

What a thing to be left behind. Yet it happens every day in this rich land. We have all heard the statistics: 47 million with no health coverage of any kind, people going bankrupt every day because of overwhelming medical bills, retired people having to decide between food or their prescriptions because they are on a fixed income. Why is this true in the richest country? Why?

Fifteen miles down the road we finally came to a turnaround and headed back to reclaim our straggler. He had grabbed his camera and gone back out on the patio to get a picture of the misty valley. When we got back to him the fog was gone the sun was blazing and we were behind schedule, but we were all together, no one left behind.

As we got close to DC, we broke up into groups that would each visit a legislator. "Who wants to visit Schumer? Who wants to visit Higgins?" etc. I chuckled at how many wanted to visit Chris Lee's office. We all knew from previous encounters that he was opposed to any public plan being included in the health care package. One of the trip leaders had come up with an ingenious prank to pull on the Congressman. Everyone who went to that office would have an empty prescription bottle with them, empty but for two cents. That two cents would of course be our two cents for him.

Anyway, we started putting together our office visit plan, who would lead, who would give testimony, what questions to ask and what our expectations should be from it all. I was with the group visiting Gillibrand, our new Senator. We had finished up our planning and were just getting to know each other some as we pulled up to the first staging area of the days events. Because of our turn around we only had about ten

minutes to wolf down lunch and change into a red t-shirt we were handed as we got off the bus. The t-shirts would ID us as a common group here in DC to lobby for universal health care. These t-shirts would also provide some comic relief at Union Station, but I get ahead of myself.

Lunch done, we were off to our first destination, Capital Hill! The Lee group got the expected "We will consider your input." His office was littered with prescription bottles as that group left. Each office visited provided a staff person. Lee was the only Republican our busload visited and the only representative dissenting on the public option in the health care package. There were groups from all across the country, even a group from Hawaii. I think almost every representative got a visit. Our visit with Gillibrand's head of staff was a grudging success. Though we heard the words "110% in favor of including a public option in any legislation she would vote for", it seemed hollow in that no commitment was given until it was forced by a flood of postcards from WNY asking why she hadn't. I would have thought it was a no brainer considering all the input she had received prior to this visit.

No brainer indeed. Another part of our info packet included a news blurb on the \$100,000,000 campaign being waged by the US Chamber of Commerce against the inclusion of any public option in the health care legislation being worked on. That's right folks, ONE HUNDRED MILLION, a one with eight zeros after it, DOLLARS!! I guess it's a no brainer for them for sure. Who knows, \$100,000,000 may just be a drop in the bucket considering the profits that are at stake. I would have been shocked to hear Ike say "Watch out for the Medical Industrial Complex!" Seems that is just what we have.

Anyway, we got our commitment from Senator Gillibrand (probably on the advice of Schumer, but that is another whole story in itself), but it may not mean anything. There are ten democratic senators who all oppose a public option being included in the health care legislation right along with the Chamber of Commerce. What kind of world is this? We think a certain party affiliation might have something to say about the trend of a conversation or the nature of the compromises that might come from those conversations. Instead we find ourselves held hostage by powerful lobbies with the money to sway supposed allies away from their true constituents. If what we propose is to have a chance, these people need to be swayed back. If what we propose is going to work, many more will need to be swayed. Hope is dim looking through this lens of reality.

On we went to fun on the Metro. Hundreds of us descended on Union Station to await the train that would bring us to Farragut North. Down into the tunnels we went, a sea of red shirts raising glances of alarm, "The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming!" That of course is an exaggeration, but it was fun to watch people's faces as we crowded the platform and even more fun engaging people in conversation around what the shirts stood for. There was plenty of agreement around the need to change the reality we have now, reason for hope. We crammed into the cars like sardines. The next four stops were like a rubics cube of people getting off and on the train. Finally we arrived at Farragut North and disembarked. As we ascended on the escalator, there were so many of us at

the same time we broke it and had to climb up to the open air. Uh oh! We're still waiting for the bill on that one.

We organized ourselves in Farragut Square Park which is a short walk from the Chamber of Commerce Building. "Singin songs and a carryin signs" we marched to the chamber building. Plenty of chanting the whole way, "What do we want?! Health care! When do we want it?! Now! "and another good one, "Everybody in, Nobody out!" I didn't chant too much. I don't WANT healthcare as much as I NEED it, kind of like education or water. I may have chanted more if we were saying "What do we need? When do we need it?". "I want" just sounds too much like a spoiled brat. Sometimes I get that feeling about us as citizens, "Just give it to me because I want it...Now!"

We congregated in front of the Commerce Building and began singing. It was hot under the baking sun and we were sweating from the short hike, but water was provided all along during the day so the singing was easy. One of the group leaders said later she saw the president of the Chamber crossing the park across from the building, but he got headed off by alert staffers who prevented an encounter with us. She said she could see his face and knew he could hear what we were saying and he looked worried. After a short news conference and a prayer, we headed to Freedom Plaza for refreshments, fruit and pizza before a worship service to culminate our visit to the Capital. More singing, it was good. More speakers, they were good. It all felt good. It's a good cause to be working on. The only thing that was missing, about one hundred thousand more people.

We won't win this battle. None of the legislators think we are powerful enough. Sure, we get nods and winks and "Ata boys", but guys like Chris Lee will just shrug it off. He doesn't think we have power. Bill Nelson of Florida, same thing. He'll just shrug it off. Max Baucus of Montana, he'll shrug it off. So will Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Ron Wyden of Oregon. These are all democratic Senators. Until they are told with a powerful presence that health care for ALL the people of our nation should come before corporate profits, they will continue to follow the money.

We are the only...ONLY (as in singular, by ourselves, gold medalists) first world nation that does NOT provide health care to all its citizens. We need to continue hammering away with the truth of this. We need to get people up off their ass's and involved in their own struggle, until it becomes an easy thing to get A MILLION people to an event like we just had, or even a hundred people to each legislator's local office all on the same day. How about both at the same time. Wouldn't that be something. Imagine that. Then maybe we would see some action.

Our hope lays in not giving up and not being silenced. We have to continue to bring truth to the people and the people to the table. We CAN win the War.

The trip home was long but uneventful. It was a worthwhile journey. We didn't leave anyone behind either.

Peace with Justice, Bob Cook