

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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Statement by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney On Striking Workers' Stand for Health Care October 15, 2003

The tens of thousands of workers who are on strike in California, West Virginia and elsewhere for quality, affordable health care are taking a stand for all American working families who are being squeezed beyond their limits by our broken and inadequate health care system. We commend the grocery store workers and Los Angeles transit workers who are exercising their unified voice on this issue through their respective unions, the UFCW and ATU, and insisting that they will not sacrifice affordable health care.

Nearly every major labor action this year, starting with the IUE/CWA members' strike against General Electric in January, has been the result of runaway health care costs and employers' attempts to foist those skyrocketing costs onto workers. Between 2000 and 2002, the real premiums workers pay for family health insurance in the most widely-used type of health plan soared by 20 percent, and employers have been cutting the benefits families get from their health plans. Nearly 44 million Americans were uninsured in 2002, an increase of 3.7 million over 2000. Unfortunately, many of those who have lost health care do have jobs -- 80 percent of the uninsured live in working households -- but can't afford the employer-provided coverage. When employers shift costs to workers, entire communities suffer because they are expected to pick up the tab for the increased public health care costs.

Both employers and workers need relief from high costs. The legislation recently enacted in California to develop strategies to do this is a welcome start and other states, as well as the federal government, would be well-advised to follow California's lead in finding long-term solutions to moderating health costs. In the meantime, pushing the bill for increasing health costs off on workers is no solution.

Our nation is facing a health care crisis of colossal proportions. The workers on strike today with UFCW and ATU should be recognized as brave leaders on the front lines of the fight for every American's basic right to have affordable and quality health care for themselves and their families.

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