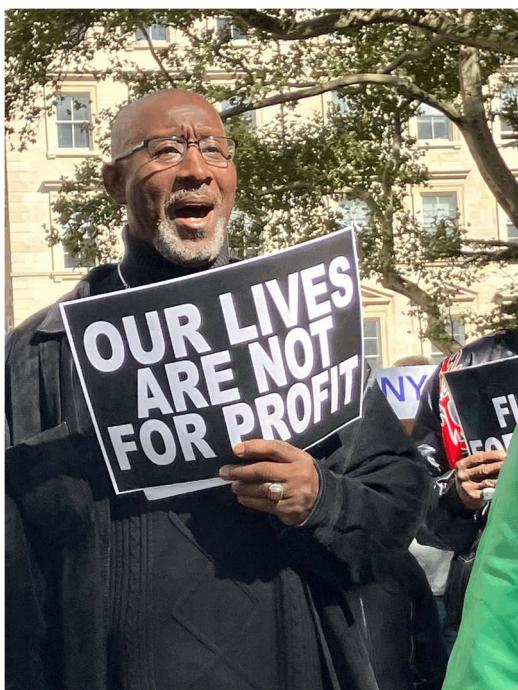


WORK-BITES

Paging Harry, Henry and Michael: Medicare Advantage Opponents Want to Sit Down With NYC Union Leader

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Municipal retirees and active workers for the City of New York rallied on Broadway yesterday in opposition to the forced switch to for-profit Medicare Advantage healthcare. *Photos by Joe Maniscalco*

By Joe Maniscalco

The City of New York's ongoing drive to force present and future municipal retirees into a for-profit Medicare Advantage healthcare system is exposing some of the most influential union leaders in town to charges of being "scabs" and betraying workers — but the head of the organization formed to help block the looming switch says there is a way out of the mess.

Harry Nespoli, head of the Municipal Labor Committee and the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association, Henry Garrido, executive director of AFSCME DC37 and Michael Mulgrew, United Federation of Teachers [UFT] president — were all loudly jeered and lambasted Wednesday afternoon outside of City Hall for their support of amending 12-126 of the Administrative Code, paving the way for the Medicare Advantage switch.

Let's Talk It Out

“I’m a lady — I would love to sit across the table from the three of them and start to negotiate some of this shit out,” Marianne Pizzitola, head of the New York City Organization of Public Service Retirees, told Work-Bites outside the UFT’s offices on Oct 12.

Upwards of 200 or more retired and active municipal workers rallied up and down Broadway between City Hall and UFT headquarters on Wednesday, making their staunch opposition to Medicare Advantage — a scheme many insist ultimately threatens lives and breaks the “solemn pact” between the City of New York and the firefighters, police officers, school teachers and others workers who serve it — clear as day.

“I spent a 38-year career in the City of New York fighting fires,” retired Deputy Fire Chief Richard Alles told fellow protesters outside City Hall. “The City of New York made a very simple contract with me. If I survived my career putting my life on the line, they promised me two things: they promised me a pension and they promised my health benefits in my retirement. I didn’t make a lot of money because we gave up raises to save our benefit — what changed in all of that? There was a sacred bond created between me and the city — I kept my oath, the City of New York is not keeping its oath.”

Alles went on — with the enthusiastic help of Medicare Advantage opponents — to identify Nespoli, Garrido and Mulgrew as “scabs” for supporting changes to Administrative Code 12-126, which would allow the Adams administration and the rest of the city’s policos, to upend the entire municipal healthcare system in search of a supposed \$600 million in savings. All this despite a judge’s ruling earlier this year, which threw a monkey wrench into those plans.

“I’m gonna give you the union — you give me the name of the scab,” Alles said. The retired firefighter also took on Nespoli head on — calling his role as head of the Uniformed Sanitationmen’s Association, “very ironic — because him tied up in all of this makes him a piece of garbage.”

Initial efforts to contact Nespoli, Garrido and Mulgrew for comment on this story have so far been unsuccessful, but Work-Bites continues to reach out.



Marianne Pizzitola, head of the New York City Organization of Public Service Retirees, at yesterday's rally outside City Hall.

Pizzitola says all three men are on the wrong side of history, however. Last week, [Work-Bites reported](#) opposition to the Medicare Advantage switch coming from the Uniformed Firefighters Association, Uniformed Fire Officers Association, and the Professional Staff Congress. Yesterday's rally also drew support from at least two other unions — Plumbers Local 1 and Local 294 NYC Laborers.

"They are pitting retirees against active employees right now, and they've been doing this for the last year-and-a-half," Pizzitola continued. "Why would they do that? Labor never did that. The whole reason that the MLC was founded was to be able to create like one big union — it was to be able to put all the unions together, stop them from being pitted against each other in bargaining and move forward as a unit to be able to get better benefits. Now, it's okay for the UFT and DC37 and the chair of the MLC to negotiate retiree benefits for the benefit of active workers? When did that become okay? They're not even thinking about their own future — and they have no problem with selling out mom, dad, grandma and grandpa."

Local 924 President Kyle Simmons said that he had to join the fight against amending Administrative Code 12-126 because it doesn't make any sense.

"It's just another band-aid and then the city is gonna come after something else, and then something, and then something else," Simmons said. "This is a big problem: no one should have to go broke to stay alive in this city. I don't care how much money you got. You have a catastrophic injury, it can wipe out every damned dime you have."

Gloria Brandman, retired New York City special education teacher and member of the Cross-Union Retirees Organizing Committee [CROC], was also pointed in her criticism about the Medicare Advantage scheme.

"We call that a form of elder abuse," Brandman said. "We are all city retirees and workers — we are teachers, we are administrators, we are plumbers, we are police officers, firefighters, healthcare workers, librarians, city laborers — and we are united here today to stop the city and mayor from changing the healthcare benefits that we were promised."

We Can Thank Donald Trump, Too

Pizzitola also pointed out that the rule change allowing for auto-enrollment into Medicare Advantage programs at the national level was originally orchestrated under former President Donald Trump as a gift to the monied class bent on making a killing in healthcare.

"This is why we're in this situation," Pizzitola said yesterday. "If they couldn't force us into these plans, we wouldn't be here. What we're seeing is other states — Delaware, Washington, Vermont, Maine, Illinois, Ohio — trying to force their retirees in these Medicare Advantage plans strictly so the venture capitalists who are bringing up these Medicare Advantage plans — who weren't even in the industry — all of a sudden want to be so they can get the federal subsidy. That needs to stop — healthcare should be a choice. Your plan should be a choice; you shouldn't be forced into it just to be able to give profits to a for-profit insurance company. We're not supposed to be working to make them millionaires. We should be working to protect the healthcare of our workers, of our retirees, of everybody — that should be what the goal is."

Editor's Note: This is a developing story Work-Bites continues to follow.