

# The New York Times

## Prescriptions

Making Sense of the Health Care Debate



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### A.F.L.-C.I.O. Members to Press Congress on Health Legislation and 'Public Option'

By [Steven Greenhouse](#)



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Richard Trumka

**Update | 10:59 a.m., Tuesday** On Monday, after the Senate majority leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, announced that he would seek a public option in the full Senate health care bill that would give states the right to opt out, Bill Samuel, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s director of government affairs, issued a statement, saying in part:

“We, along with the majority of Americans and many Members of Congress, support a robust public option to bring down costs and keep insurance companies honest. The Senate is making great progress toward that end and we are encouraged by today’s announcement.”

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The A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s new president, Richard L. Trumka, announced Monday that the labor federation would make Thursday, Nov. 5, a nationwide “Day of Action” for union members to press their members of Congress to back sweeping health care legislation.

“We hope to flood the halls of Congress with calls from working families that want to see real reform,” Mr. Trumka said in a telephone news conference.

The Nov. 5 effort, he said, will involve a letter-writing and phone campaign at thousands of work sites, where union members will contact lawmakers in Washington to urge them to support a “public option” — creation of a new government-run health plan that would compete with private insurers.

“We’re at a pivotal point as the Senate leadership continues to craft a bill to go to the Senate floor and the House leadership works on combining their three bills,” Mr. Trumka said. “Many of us have spent our lifetimes fighting to ensure that all Americans have quality and affordable health care, and there will be no bigger ally in that fight than organized labor.”

Mr. Trumka spoke out vigorously against the Senate Finance Committee bill’s provision for an excise tax that would require insurance companies to pay a tax on health plans costing \$21,000 or more. Such a tax, many analysts have said, could hit union members disproportionately, especially ones in dangerous occupations like mining and fire fighting, because insurers hit by the tax could be expected to pass on at least part of that tax to workers.

Attacking that proposal as one that would hit the middle class, Mr. Trumka said, “Working families that are already struggling to pay for health care shouldn’t be asked to pay more in the form of a new tax.”

The Senate Finance Committee bill added the excise tax to help pay for the health care overhaul and to pressure employers to offer less expensive health plans. But the three House committees that have approved health legislation have not approved an excise tax; instead, House leaders are pressing for a surtax on the wealthy to help finance reform.

Mr. Trumka said he was open to the idea of a “Cadillac tax” on plans that truly provide luxury coverage — plans that he said were considerably more expensive and more

generous than the ones used by union members. He declined to say whether the A.F.L.-C.I.O. might support an excise tax that had a threshold starting at, say, \$30,000 or \$35,000, instead of \$21,000.

“We think the excise tax as it is currently structured is a bad type of policy,” he said. “I’m not going to play the what-ifs.”

In addition to the public option, organized labor is supporting a mandate that would require employers either to provide health coverage or to pay a contribution for every employee without coverage.

“We cannot be in favor of reform for reform’s sake,” Mr. Trumka said. “This is the moment to make sure that it’s real and will relieve the daily stress of Americans in paying for health care.”

He said the A.F.L.-C.I.O., a federation of 57 unions with 8 million union members, would be working with a rival union federation, Change to Win, on the Nov. 5 campaign.