

The popular response to the shooting of UnitedHealthcare's CEO and American realities

David Walsh

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On December 4, Brian Thompson, chief executive officer of health insurance giant UnitedHealthcare (total assets US\$273.7 billion), was shot and killed in Midtown Manhattan. An arrest was made on Monday in Pennsylvania of a “strong person of interest” in the case, someone, according to the local police, who “has some ill will toward corporate America.”

Thompson's murder has become a significant social and political focal point in the US. It has brought to light certain realities about American life generally buried in the media under a ton of self-delusion, lies and stupidities.

In the first place, the popular reaction to the shooting has revealed widespread anger against the private health insurance system, in particular, and corporate giants, in general. To borrow from what we wrote some years ago, the incident “makes plain ... *how widely hated* capitalism is in America. And why not? Who's more intimately familiar with its workings than the American population? Of course only a small number are *consciously aware* of how much they distrust and despise the present social system and have thought out its implications.”

A remarkable front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* this week, headlined “Manhunt for UnitedHealthcare CEO Killer Meets Unexpected Obstacle: Sympathy for the Gunman,” noted that “authorities are contending with an unanticipated challenge: an outpouring of popular sympathy for the killer.”

From online forums and social media to the streets of Manhattan, people have been celebrating the suspect as a quasi-folk hero who struck a blow against a detested institution—the nation's for-profit healthcare system.

The media is suddenly full of pressing items it has not seen fit to feature previously, relating the horror stories of those whose medical treatment was delayed, denied or generally undermined by corporations, such as UnitedHealthcare. There is not room enough in a *dozen* WSWs perspectives even to summarize the details. Social media were flooded with nightmarish accounts.

One woman reported battling an insurance company while she was nine months pregnant and her one-year-old child was in the hospital with a potentially fatal brain tumor. ... Another received a bill, because while in excruciating pain she had been sent to a hospital “out of network,” that “was more than what we paid for the home that we live

in, and it was going to take probably, I don't know, 20 to 30 years to pay off this hospital bill.” The family declared bankruptcy. ... A third: “Today I'm thinking about the time United Healthcare suddenly decided to stop paying for my chemotherapy and didn't bother telling me, so the nurses had to tell me when I checked in at the cancer center for my next treatment.” There is no end to the tragedies.

According to various reports, medical bills are the number one cause of personal bankruptcy in the US. “One study has claimed that 62.1% of bankruptcies were caused by medical issues” (*The Balance*). Tens of thousands die in the US each year as the result of a lack of any health insurance. How many others die from the insurance companies' rejections or delays or from the long-term stress of having to worry about their health?

The ruling elite and its media outlets have been made nervous by the Thompson killing and the popular reaction. There has been non-stop coverage since last Wednesday morning. In part, this is an attempt by the media, as is its wont, to divert attention from war, social inequality and the danger of fascism. But, more importantly, it reflects a genuine and deep-going anxiety about the state of hostility and anger toward the billionaires, who are perceived to own everything, run everything and steal everything.

The reaction by the establishment is an expression of a collective guilty conscience. The executives of mammoth corporations, who are busy putting new security measures into place and barricading themselves like never before, know they are despised. They can and must increasingly expect to come under attack.

Terroristic moods can find some room for growth in the present political situation, especially among the young. The election campaign and election results were grim for the more vulnerable or impressionable. Two big business candidates and parties of war, violence and repression, and now the prospect of a horrible Trump administration coming up. Official politics is odious beyond words, dominated by vicious, right-wing, militaristic and chauvinistic figures, without any apparent relief in sight.

Millions feel no outlet for their sentiments and interests, as the present situation and outpouring of emotion indicates. They have to be shown a way out of the present impasse by a concerted, politically conscious movement of the working class. Individual acts of violence will not change the situation in the slightest and will only increase state repression.

Terrorism, as Rosa Luxemburg argued in 1905, referring to the situation in Russia,

was born historically out of pessimism, from loss of faith in the possibility of a political mass movement. ... It essentially stood in opposition to [the idea of] a mass movement of the working class.

Terrorism, she added,

was bound to have more of a soporific and paralyzing effect, rather than rousing action—even though it might evoke strong feelings of moral satisfaction in each individual case.

In effect, the great Polish-German revolutionary went on, the acts of vengeance carried out by the terrorists

invariably awakened vague hopes and expectations—especially among unclear and wavering elements—that they could rely on the miracle-working invisible arm of the terrorist “avengers.”

The Thompson affair has also laid bare immense, unbearable paradoxes in American society. How horribly backward and primitive this country is in so many ways!

An overwhelming contradiction exists between technological abundance and the terrible cultural and intellectual inadequacies.

Here we are, a quarter of the way into the 21st century, and an advanced society allows companies and individuals to prey on the sick and the suffering for profit and personal gain. The CEOs of the six major national insurers earned a combined \$122,970,614 in total compensation in 2023. UnitedHealth Group CEO Andrew Witty received \$23.5 million in pay last year. No wonder they are viewed by their victims as bloodsuckers!

Artificial intelligence is used by the healthcare industry to further abuse and torment people. “Automation and predictive technologies,” according to a US Senate subcommittee last summer, have been introduced to increase denial rates for care for the elderly.

The political situation in America is complex, and many people are confused. But innumerable surveys and polls reveal distrust, dislike and even hatred of insurance and drug companies, the big banks, Wall Street, the rich and so forth. All of this flies in the face of the fantastical image of the American people in love with the billionaires, Musk, Bezos and the rest of the scoundrels.

Undoubtedly, many of those now responding with hostility and even fury to the heinous activities of the health insurance companies and their CEO oligarchs voted for Donald Trump a little more than a month ago. Whatever these super-rich reactionary imbeciles may think, they are going to provoke a firestorm of opposition and resistance.

Luxemburg’s criticism of terrorism is ours as well. She explained that such actions weaken

the clear understanding of the absolute necessity for, and the exceptionally decisive importance of, a mass movement among the people, a mass revolution of the proletariat.

The ruling class in America has proved itself incapable of providing even the most minimal protection of life and health. Obamacare, drafted in close consultation with the insurance companies and drug manufacturers, was a fraud, a bonanza for the healthcare insurers that did nothing to stop soaring healthcare costs and the general public health disaster.

In the COVID pandemic, more than 1 million people have been allowed to die to keep corporate profits and the stock market humming. Public health and the health of the public are in a terrible state. Life expectancy declined 2.4 years in the first two years of the pandemic; it still has not recovered to pre-COVID levels. A ruling elite that would allow masses of its citizens to perish needlessly is capable of anything.

Like every important feature of life, medicine and healthcare are fatally marked by social stratification, unequal levels of wealth.

Only socialism, the rule of the working class based on the principles of social equality, can solve the current problems.

The American people and every people have the right to high-quality healthcare.

The answer to the current crisis lies in ending the privately owned healthcare corporations, which take in nearly \$300 billion in profits annually, and establishing fully socialized medicine. An end to for-profit hospitals, healthcare insurers and drug companies! The resources exist many times over to provide the best quality of healthcare, free of charge and readily accessible to every human being.

At the same time, tens of billions need to be poured into existing and new facilities and the training of new doctors, nurses and other healthcare providers. The basic rights of the population include the right to free preventive care, prescription drugs, mental healthcare and every advanced test and procedure, and, of critical importance, the right to an abortion, one of a woman’s most important civil, political and cultural rights. Existing personal debt accumulated through exorbitant and outrageous healthcare expenses must be abolished.

All of this can and must be accomplished by a politically conscious working class, putting an end to the capitalist system and its irrational, destructive subordination of human life to profit.



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