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USA

Assassination of Insurance Executive Brings Little Sympathy but Much Criticism of Health Insurance Companies

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In the early morning of December 4, a man with a pistol assassinated Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, one of the largest corporations in the world which was holding a meeting for investors in New York City. Police found shell casings marked with the words “depose,” “delay,” and “deny,” words often used by the health insurance industry when rejecting patients’ claims. The shooter left a backpack in Central Park, found by the police, containing nothing but Monopoly game money, another implicit criticism of the industry.

While Thompson’s shooting led to the mobilization of hundreds of police officers and detectives, there has been no sympathy from the public but rather an outpouring of criticism and expressions of frustration, anger, and disgust with the industry he represented. A New York Times headline read, “Torrent of Hate for Health Insurance Industry Follows C.E.O.’s Killing,” The article began, “The fatal shooting on Wednesday of a top UnitedHealthcare executive, Brian Thompson, on a Manhattan sidewalk has unleashed a torrent of morbid glee from patients and others who say they have had negative experiences with health insurance companies at some of the hardest times of their lives.”

UnitedHealth posted a condolence message, but it had to be taken down because 84,000 people—no doubt many of them customers—sent a laughter emoji. One person wrote on TikTok, “I’m an ER [emergency room] nurse and the things I’ve seen dying patients get denied for by insurance makes me physically sick. I just can’t feel sympathy for him because of all of those patients and their families.”

Unlike most advanced industrial countries, the United States doesn’t have a national health system providing universal access to health care. There is neither national health insurance coverage nor national hospitals and clinics. The system is largely privately owned and for-profit. According to the U.S. Census, 8.2% of Americans, or 27.1 million people, largely old and poor people, have no health insurance coverage whatsoever. Some 65.4% of Americans had private health insurance, while 36.3% have public coverage through government programs, such as Medicaid, Medicare, and various military and veteran programs. Some people have both private and public insurance. Most Americans (57%) have health insurance through their employers. The Affordable Care Act, known as Obama Care, offers insurance to household what earn too much for Medicaid or don’t have employer insurance coverage. The insurance companies’ bureaucracies work to reduce claims and increase profits. UnitedHealth, according to a recent business report, denied 33% of claims in 2023, the most in the industry.

UnitedHealthcare is part of UnitedHealth Group, America’s largest insurance company and the fourth-largest corporation of any type in America as ranked by revenue in the Fortune 500 list. UnitedHealthcare has approximately 400,000 employees and had 52.7 million medical insurance members at the end of 2023. The company expects to have \$455 billion in revenues in 2025 and had \$22.3 billion in profits last year, up from \$13 billion in 2019. The COVID pandemic led to greater profits because fewer people went to the hospital for doctor visits and treatments, so companies didn’t have to pay claims. UnitedHealth Group and other insurers routinely increase profits by delaying or denying claims payments for treatment. Thompson, who was under investigation for insider trading, was slated to become president of the corporation when he was murdered.

The killing of Thompson has turned his assassin into an admired Robin Hood figure. “Anyone who helps to identify the shooter is an enemy of the people,” said a post on X with more than 110,000 likes and nearly 9,200 retweets,” according to The Washington Post. But we don’t need a Robin Hood, we need a movement for democratic socialism.

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